

The Reluctant Alchemist's Guide to Thedas (Vol. 1)

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The Reluctant Alchemist's Guide to Thedas (Vol. 1)

by [paraparadigm](#)

Summary

Remastered Version of [The Reluctant Alchemist's Guide to Thedas, Part 1](#)

A modern-day historian tries to survive Thedas by wit, chance, and the skin of her teeth at the questionable edges of the Inquisition.

Margo Duvalle likes her quiet academic life just fine. Her research on the history of botany is going well - until she finds an odd manuscript in the local special collections library. What starts as a promising source for a new article leads to a series of unfortunate events that hurl Margo into an unfamiliar world - and into a stranger's body. But a PhD in history doesn't prepare you for surviving in a world on the edge of collapse, especially when the organization that seeks to fix things is itself a sordid mess. As she tries to unravel the mysteries lurking behind young Evelyn Trevelyan's apparent incompetence, Margo is led into a tangled web that weaves multiple worlds together — and what waits in the shadows might be much bigger than whatever strife plagues Thedas.

Notes

A rewrite/edited version of Part 1 of The Reluctant Alchemist's Guide to Thedas, which got orphaned in error. Part 2 of the series is ongoing, with semi-regular updates.

A few notes about what RAGtT is and isn't in the interest of managing expectations and help you decide whether to give it a whirl:

- The tone is humor, but the world-building is dark. I take some of the worst choices that could have happened in the previous two games (and some that couldn't have happened in-game at all) and combine them into a particularly crapsack version of Thedas.
- The main character is not the Inquisitor, and is not "oracular." She has no prior familiarity with the games or the game world. (Of course, that doesn't mean that she won't impact events).
- This is not a "The MCIT Will Fix-It." This is probably the most important point going forward. I mean this in the sense that it is explicitly not a Modern Girl Saves Thedas wish-fulfillment power fantasy, and I very deliberately write (or try to write) against the grain of that trope. If you're mostly accustomed to saving-the-world superhero narratives, this story won't fulfill those expectations. This is really meant for a mature audience: the world is messy and complex, power(s) come at a cost, characters are small cogs in a great indifferent machinery, the night is dark and full of terrors etc etc
- This is a canon-compliant(ish) AU and is skewed towards original fiction. RAGT improvises on the game's timeline until the end of Act I, then deviates quite drastically after that. This is not a retelling of the canonical story we all know and love. With that in mind, I treat the universe of this fic as its own standalone world, in that it tries to build an overarching explanation for what an MCIT would be doing in Thedas in the first place. This also means that while characters have their in-game motivations and plans and try to be very mindful of their original voicing and characterization, they are also reacting to a completely different set of parameters, so the overarching plot shifts accordingly.
- If you would like a change from a predominantly Western European fantasy world-building, this draws a lot on Central European and Slavic folklore and quite a bit on Central Asian religions and mythology (for reasons pertinent to the plot).
- English is not my first language. I am certainly linguistically competent in it, but if some turns of phrase have a bit of an odd flavor, this is probably a side-effect of that (of course, the OC's first language is also not English, so we could write it off to her voicing/characterization). Please feel free to leave me a comment if you catch something too egregious.

A quick additional note about the world-building and characterization. The plot of this story is NOT Solas/Fen'Harel centric in the sense that there are more than one big player and more than one big issue, and the problems and challenges of the RAGT-verse have their own internal logic.

Thank you for your reading eyes. I welcome both comments and concrit, and appreciate the labor you put into composing them.

Content warnings are applied to specific chapters.

NSFW chapters are marked with *

Graphically violent chapters are marked with ^

All characters except OCs belong to Bioware.

D is for Deathroot

Chapter Notes

Content warning: this chapter references attempted sexual assault

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Aconitum... Aconitum."

Margo stared at the yellowed parchment page with dull-minded ferocity. The staring lent no discernible result, save for the bleary vision and thunderous headache gathering steam somewhere at the back of her skull.

"That's not an aconite, it's a delphinium, you mindless git."

For the most part, Margo loved ancient botanical treatises. The delicate scroll, the dry smell of parchment, the beautiful, minutely detailed hand-drawn illustrations. This one though, was an exception. As far as botanical treatises went, it sucked. And trying to translate said treatise at 10pm at night, after she had taught two lectures and one review session and was wrung out, sucked especially thoroughly. She could barely make out the plant names, likely transcribed by someone with only a marginal grasp of the subject matter, and even less aptitude.

The manuscript was anonymous, of course. As far as Margo could tell, it was likely a copy of a copy, commissioned by some provincial abbot to supplement some boondock monastery's piddling curriculum, and, judging by the abundant mistakes and heinous drawings, executed by a perennially drunken monk.

Margo decided to call him Brother Rufus.

That hadn't stopped the rare collections librarian from treating the manuscript like it was Paracelsus's lost formula for the elixir of eternal life.

"This is a very precious text," the pearl-wearing paragon of propriety had imparted on Margo, her platinum bob staying eerily immobile despite the unmistakable head shake of preemptive disapproval. Margo had nodded sagely.

Sure it was.

She should have felt grateful that it was even available. It wasn't like her new article on medieval materia medica trade routes was going to write itself without original sources. But there were original sources, and then there was Brother Rufus's magnum opus of mediocre drawings and bullshit plant names. The poor sod couldn't even identify an aconite properly.

Margo turned the page. Stared.

And then stared some more.

Brother Rufus wasn't just drinking, she decided. He must have been digging into the Datura supplies.

The drawing was poorly traced, and the ink had leached into the paper over the years, but the picture looked more like some kind of sea creature plopped out of the water and left to putrefy – a mass of dark tentacles with some vaguely hostile looking red dots speckling the entire arrangement. Might have been berries, might have been eyes, for all Margo could tell. Either that, or Brother Rufus had spat out some wine on the page. Probably nose spat it, Margo decided, considering the slightly bumpy nature of the splatter. Centuries old wine mixed in with some dead monk's mucus.

What could be better?

There was a scribble next to the drawing which looked vaguely like a plant name annotation, but only if you sort of crossed your eyes and squinted at it sideways. Darth Rot? That didn't sound right. She snapped a picture of the text on her cellphone and ran it through the sharpen algorithm of her photo software. It didn't lend a stark improvement, but...

"Ok, Brother Rufus, what the hell is a Death Root?"

She turned to the next page. The drawing featured therein didn't exactly ameliorate on the previous entry. It had a cyan-colored tip and a fleshy base and looked like... Well.

"Alright. What shall we call you? I vote for Orc's Rod."

There was the distinct sound of someone clearing their throat. Margo looked up. To say the librarian's expression was disapproving would be like saying that leprosy was a chronic skin condition.

Margo schooled her face into something she hoped was appropriately chastised. The inscription next to the "plant," if one could call it that, was surprisingly legible at least. Really, though? "Deep mushroom?" As opposed to what, shallow mushroom? She sighed. Why don't we just cut to the chase, and call it "Some Fungus."

The next page didn't have any botanical drawings, but a kind of addendum, or perhaps commentary, by the otherwise anonymous Brother Rufus.

"Taken from the Compendium of Ines Arancia, Foul Beldams and Loose Mistress who is't shouldst has't been burn'd at the Stake f'r h'r naughty Ways and unholy Cons'rtion with the Flibbertigibbet, and did punish duly as wast pleasing and prop'r."

Margo frowned.

"Fuck you too, Brother Rufus."

"Ms. Duvalle! Please watch your language in the library."

Margo looked up again. "My apologies."

It probably wasn't a good time to remind the librarian that it was Dr. Duvalle, but it still chafed.

She got up, taking the tome with her.

"Ms. Kostinsky, do you happen to have anything on this Ines Arancia this manuscript mentions?"

The librarian looked at her with thinly veiled disdain and pointed her chin at the computer – itself a medieval artifact – and its supposed electronic catalogue.

"Have you tried to run a search?"

"I haven't, but..."

"We are closing in ten minutes. Would you like to return that?"

It wasn't really a question. Margo relinquished the tome, and went back to her desk to gather her stuff. There was a strange tingling sensation in her fingertips – not an itch, exactly, but a kind of dull throb, like the precursor of a burn.

She walked out of the library into the frigid night air. The snowflakes were twirling in the light of the single street lamp.

Her car was parked a good fifteen minutes away from the university library, and she bundled her coat against the chill, steeling herself for the walk. She wished they'd change the street lamps. The new lights were on the duller side, apparently for the sake of energy efficiency. At least, this part of town was mostly quiet, and heavily policed by the university cops.

The burn in her fingers was getting more uncomfortable. She wondered if it was an allergic reaction – perhaps to a compound that had sealed the manuscript's ink or had been used to treat the paper? She should have used her gloves.

She'd wash her hands when she got home. And then cuddle in bed with Mindy, the feline terror. Although the little furry traitor was probably sleeping on Jake's fold-out couch, while he was weathering another explosive breakup in her tiny apartment. Her brother has always been better with cats than with women.

She'd settle for a glass of Merlot and Netflix instead.

Her mind returned to Ines Arancia. She wondered who she had been – and how the inept monk had gotten his hands on this Ines's Compendium, from where he had copied the strange plant entries. If only she could track down the original, this could actually be quite interesting.

She was absorbed in her thoughts, which meant that she wasn't paying attention when the man in the leather jacket turned into her street and fell in step behind her. Even when the footsteps quickened, their staccato rhythm bouncing off the brick wall of the warehouse along which she was walking, it took her too long to register the danger, as if through a fog.

And then the wind was knocked out of her. She fell to the ground, hands thrown out defensively to try to stave off the impact with the pavement. The shock resonated through her bones, making her teeth clatter in her head. Before she could recover, someone grabbed her hair, and yanked her forward, then back up unto her feet. She tried to scream, but got a mouthful of leather glove. It tasted like stale cigarettes and gunmetal.

She tried to kick out with her foot, but it didn't connect. She was launched into the brick wall, and then the bastard body slammed into her, a hand fumbling at her jeans, the cold sharp press of a knife at her throat.

"Don't move, little bitch," he breathed into her ear, the air around him rancid with unprocessed alcohol and the acrid, metallic tang of cheap cologne.

She didn't waste her breath trying to argue, but kicked out again, and this time there was a satisfying meaty thump, and she ducked out and to the left, out of the knife's way.

She ran. She could hear her attacker lunging after her, but she fixed her eyes on the blue light of an

emergency phone, all the way up the street, so she sped up, lungs burning with gulps of icy air.

She almost made it. He caught up to her some fifteen feet away from the blue beacon. When she realized she wouldn't outrun him, she turned around. Later, much later, when all of this is over, she will struggle to remember his face, and can't.

She dodged the first blow, and yelled "Help!" at the top of her lungs. And then, belatedly, "Fire!" Because crowd psychology was predictable when it came to women being attacked in the street.

The second blow landed on her stomach, connecting. She doubled over, with the sudden clarity that she was probably going to die, and that her hands for some reason were glowing green. They felt very hot, itchy, and like they should be put to some kind of use, though she couldn't quite fathom what – a weird thing to worry about under the circumstances. For an irrational second she thought of Ines Arancia, "Foul Beldams," and wondered if she did end up getting burned at the stake, as per Brother Rufus's suggestion, but then a pair of hands closed around her throat, and she couldn't breathe.

She tried to kick her assailant in the nutsack – because if ever someone had it coming - but he was expecting it, and her kick landed on his thigh instead. Dark spots bloomed, ate away at her vision. Her hands were on fire by then, though the fire felt cold and almost astringent, and Margo had the sudden, unwelcome insight that the pages were probably coated in some sort of plant toxin. Her mind, fuzzy and distant by that point, hurled towards the bottom of the cone of darkness, and at its center a greenish glow beckoned. A voice whispered something important. Well, not a voice, exactly, more like a sense of intent.

It told her that it could help.

It told her to stop struggling, and to just let it through.

It told her that it too had struggled.

It told her that it could give her justice.

Distantly, as if in another world, in another lifetime, her back hit the pavement. She felt the sudden cold bite of winter air on her bare thighs.

And so, with what remained of her awareness, she forced herself to move over, and to let the whispering thing come through.

A sensation of being turned inside out, and then falling down the tunnel while something else – something distinctly alien and so profoundly wrathful she had no words for it - rushed by, and before she reached the bottom of her free fall, she saw her body shoving its hands wrist-deep into her attacker's chest.

Her clawed hands.

Except not her hands anymore, because she was airborne, and then torn through some kind of cosmic membrane with a sound of ripping fabric. A sense of something vast and incomprehensible and distinctly non-Euclidean warped her mind to the breaking point and then past it, and then she plummeted into a darkness tinged with that same acidic green light.

When Margo comes to, there is a room, the smell of wood smoke, and a pungent, but not altogether unpleasant aroma – like inula and camphor, with an underlying spice she can't identify.

Something like nutmeg, but more bitter. The smell is reassuring, somewhere half-way between medicine and incense.

When she tries to move, her body feels strange – like it's not quite sure it fits her. And then, the vertigo passes, and everything snaps into place. She sits up.

She is covered with a rough woolen blanket that smells of sheep. And underneath, she is naked. And this is definitely not her body.

"What the actual fuck?" she manages, and then a movement catches her eye.

"Good. You are awake" a man utters, the voice amused, but mild. "That is one less casualty than we have thought."

She pulls the blanket more securely around herself, and looks him over. He's slender, long, bald, and has pointy ears. And he is most definitely not human. Humanoid, yes. But this is not, as far as she can tell, the same sub-species. Like, say, mugwort to wormwood. Both species of *Artemesia*, two quite different plants.

"Is this a dream? A hallucination?" She swallows. While she's on a roll with the rhetorical questions, she might as well get the big one on the table. "Am I dead?"

"You most certainly were dead, so I must admit I am pleasantly surprised at your unexpected recovery."

She swallows. Her throat feels parched, and there is an ache in her side.

"What killed me?"

"A demon, I would guess."

"A what, now?"

"A demon." The amusement fades from his eyes. "We lost too many soldiers in the battle. We brought our wounded back, but many more I fear will not recover. Our medicine supplies are short, and there are too few mages in Haven to help the healing."

There is a strange sing-song quality to his voice that lulls her into accepting the statement as is. Before, of course, its meaning actually reaches her brain.

"Battle? Um... did you say mages?"

He simply nods, and then stands up.

"Rest. You were badly damaged, and it will take time for you to recover your faculties. I have more patients to see before the day's end."

"I..." She thinks. This doesn't feel like a dream, but even if it is, mindlessly gaping won't get her anywhere. She should be in a state of shock, but she is not. Her body - which isn't hers - is tired, but sedate.

"I think I have memory loss. I am not quite sure...what or who I am."

Which isn't a lie. The man stops, and walks back to the bed, crouching next to it. He brings his face close to hers, and at this distance, the slight difference of his physique feels less pronounced. Margo forces herself to remain still, to stand her ground. She tries to consider his features

analytically, as if he were a painting, or a statue from a bygone era. She tries to decide whether he is handsome, but the differences snag at her perception too much for that.

"I can tell you that you are a warrior. Based on your weaponry, you are trained in stealth, and wield daggers. I thought I saw you kill a rage demon, but not before it struck you. Though its remains were nowhere to be found when I got to you. You were dying. I did what I could to repair the damage, but I had not thought it would be sufficient. And others needed my help." His grey eyes seem to cloud over, like he's stepping away and deeper inside of himself. "All decisions are sacrifices, are they not?"

Margo thinks back to her body dying in the alley, at the hands of some anonymous asshole. About the call for her to "let it through." About her hands, no longer her own, ripping into a chest. "I suppose. Is that all you can tell me?"

"Besides this, I can only tell you the obvious. You are skilled at war, but not skilled enough to not get mauled in battle. Though this is ill luck as much as flaws in training. Do you recall your clan?"

She blinks at that.

"You do not strike me as a city elf. Your body is clearly honed for physical activity." She thinks there's a twinkle of humor there, but it's gone before it can settle into something more definitive, and he is back to neutral. Good, because she is distinctly not in the mood for insinuating jokes. "I thought you Dalish." He frowns at that. "Though you are unmarked, so perhaps not. In any case, your memory will likely return in time, and you will solve that mystery yourself."

He gets up, very clearly done with the conversation.

"I have another difficult patient to care for, and if she does not make it, then I fear things will truly become desperate. When you are sufficiently recovered, seek out master Adan. He is as likely to blow you up as he is to prescribe you the correct tonic, but I would take the chance. Your ribs will keep paining you without an elfroot infusion."

"Thank you, uh..."

"Solas. Mend well."

When the door closes, Margo throws off the blanket. There is no mirror, but a wash basin stands next to the bed, its water dark. As a reflective surface, it's enough to get an idea of her appearance. The face that stares back is not her own. It has high cheekbones and large grey eyes, instead of her hazel ones. Its hair is flaxen, and tied back in a braid. It is younger than her, but not by much - late twenties to her 31. There is dried blood caked around her hair line. This body is shorter, narrower, with clear but lean muscles and a criss crossing of new and old scars. A bad one, pink and raised, bisects her abdomen.

And her ears are pointy.

"Who the hell are you?" she asks the water.

She is still naked, so she looks around the room. There is a set of clothes on top of a chest, and unless she wants to wander around in the buff, she better tackle them. Fortunately, they are functional enough that everything makes sense. And they are comfortable. A simple set of soft leather pants, cotton shorts of some sort that she assumes are underwear, a set of three bandages that she decides are for wrapping: one set for her chest, two for her feet, in lieu of socks. A linen shirt and a fur lined leather coat, well worn, with the strong smell of wood fires. It takes a few tries

with the bandages, but the rest proceeds smoothly.

She notices the book when she's looking for a pair of shoes. It's propped on a shelf, its spine worn and a little greasy from handling, the gold lettering almost faded, but legible.

When she deciphers the author's name, the feeling is a nauseating mix of relief and dread. She supposes this is what "awe" feels like. The spine reads "The Botanical Compendium." By Ines Arancia.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Ines Arancia, whose formularies have truly universal appeal.

Next up: A new and unpleasant world

Transplanted

Chapter Summary

In which Margo gets an introduction to Haven, Varric comes to the rescue, and the Spymaster has ways of making you talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She locates her boots by the door, and tucks the Compendium into her coat before pulling them on. They are wet and muddy from melting snow, and caked with a kind of rusty clumpy mix, like ash and dry blood. Come to think of it, that's probably exactly what it is. They are still dry inside, so Margo files that away as a win.

She stalls at the threshold. The air is brisk with mountain snow, but it has a layered richness to it underneath the crisp frost — wood smoke, roasting meat, a trace of sulfur and hot metal. She catches a whiff of manure, but even that isn't an entirely familiar odor. She has a vague suspicion that the beasts that produced the shit in question wouldn't be found in any zoology book she's ever seen.

And then she looks at the sky — and gapes. She has no way of describing it, really. It's like a giant cyclone hovering above the mountain, except that cyclones don't usually come in lime green. And there's something about it that looks wrong, and it makes her think of her itchy hands and of the nagging little voice-intent at the bottom of the death tunnel. *Let me in.*

"Ain't Kansas indeed," she mutters, because hysterical sarcasm seems a better option than just plain old hysterics.

"Hey, knife ear!" She turns her head in the direction of the sound, and it takes her a second to decide that this is some form of address, and that it's directed at her. And that, judging by the leers, it's derogatory.

A couple of large dudes in – well, let's call a spade a spade – full armor, are milling about on a pair of crates next to a wall. It's hard to tell the time, but Margo guesses that it's creeping towards evening. Either that, or they're shirking whatever duties full armor presupposes in favor of some kind of game. Dice, she decides, though they're using what looks suspiciously like the ankle bones of some small animal. Well, at least some of the laws of physics are the same. There's gravity. The ground is solid, the sky is above, water is wet, strangers, conveniently, speak a variant of English. And assholes are a truly universal phenomenon.

"What are yer gaping at? You addled?" Tweedledee volunteers. He's poorly shaven, and sports a large plum sized bruise on the side of his face. Probably had it coming, too. His buddy – Margo decides he's the Tweedledum of the pair – just leers. He's missing a front tooth, and the gum might or might not be abscessed. "Go fetch some beer for your betters."

Margo briefly wonders if this is a gender or a species pecking order. She decides that it's probably both. Regardless, give an inch, loose a mile, so she plants her hands on her hips and hopes her patented withering stare, honed on recalcitrant students, will translate into – well, whatever body

Margo Duvalle, PhD and body snatcher extraordinaire has been relocated into.

It doesn't quite have the desired effect.

"Definitely addled. Fetch. Us. Some. Beer. Wench." Tweedledee articulates with exaggerated slowness, and adds a gesture that mimes drinking.

"You think she's a mute, Marek? Lets see if she understands signs." Tweedledum points at her, and then proceeds to pat his crotch, and follows this up with hand motions that probably mean to convey copulation, but look more like he's trying to fit a large barrel around his privates.

What was the alchemist's name? Adan? She levels what she hopes is a cool stare at Tweedledum. "If you're having troubles down there, I suggest you go see Adan and get a salve. Wouldn't want it to get worse, you know how these things can get. First you stick it in funny places, and then – *poof* – it shrivels and falls off."

Tweedledum gapes at her, clearly considering what to do about the insult. The other Tweedle just bursts out laughing. "You asked for that one. The Commander said no picking on the knife-ears, 'cuz we're all working together, what with the Breach and all. Though I say the sweet little rabbit can still go fetch us our drink, and look pretty doing it. Right, love?"

"Go fetch your own beer, you plum faced gibbon."

This, Tweedledee doesn't take well, though Margo thinks he's a bit confused about the whole gibbon bit. The two start rising slowly, and she decides that antagonizing the goons was probably not the smartest strategy, but her uncle had told his army hazing stories when she was a kid, and from those she knows that it's better to get the beating out of the way early, but make it not worth the effort for the assailants on future occasions. She figures, same rules apply.

"Wow, wow, wow, lads, let's all settle down, and play nice."

The new addition to their little dog and pony show is probably four feet eleven, at best. He's stocky, blond, with a large square jaw and a crossbow the size of a hand-held cannon slung across his back. And he is most definitely not quite Homo Sapiens either. But he swaggers over, and plants himself right in between the two Tweedles and herself.

"What's this to you, Varric? She's just some elf."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong, my friend. She's not just some elf. She is one of the Nightingale's elves. Do you really want to piss off our spymaster? I mean, don't let me stop you, it's your suicide, but being the altruistic guy that I am, I'd advise against it."

That seems to give the Tweedles pause, and Margo decides to file this away for future reference. Nightingale, Spymaster. What does it mean that she was hers? Are elves slaves here? Servants? She's guessing both, but this, if nothing else, is an army. There might be other hierarchies at play.

"Come on, Prickly. Walk with me."

All things being equal, following this Varric seems like the best possible alternative among a range of shitty options. She walks beside him down the street, between the small wooden houses, towards a building that appears to be a smithy. Behind it, against the evening gloaming, she can see the black outline of a trebuchet.

"Thanks for the help. Your name is Varric?"

He does a mock curtsy. "Varric Tethras, storyteller, upstanding businessman, and dashing rogue — all at your service. And this beauty is Bianca." He gestures to the crossbow.

"Varric, Bianca. A pleasure."

He shoots her an approving grin.

"They're not all quite this bad, you know. These two are particularly obnoxious, but curly is keeping most of his people more or less in check. Everyone's on edge, though — and just when we seem to have a shot at fixing this mess, it's not even clear that the Trevelyan gal will recover. You're new with the Nightingale, aren't you?"

Margo shrugs. "Honestly, I don't know. I must have gotten knocked out during the battle... so I can't seem to remember much at all."

Varric whistles between his teeth. "Amnesia, heh. Happened to someone I knew once. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy, either. But you came through for me in that miserable pit. The rage demon popped out of the ground — as they tend to, pesky bastards — and he would've chewed off my head if you hadn't diced him first. Distracted it from Lady Traveleyan and her green glowing hand of doom to boot, so we all owe you one. No wonder Chuckles has been fussing over you like a mother hen — he doesn't usually bother quite this much with the common soldiers. And speaking of Chuckles, there's someone who needs to sleep. He's practically keeling over, running around trying to heal everyone."

Margo tries to process all of this. "Chuckles is Solas? And this Lady Traveleyan, she is someone important?"

Varric nods. "Looks like just another hothouse nobleman's daughter to me. Not a good fighter, either. Nice enough, I suppose, but a bit... peculiar. But Seeker Pentaghast and our resident apostate seem to think she's going to solve this here problem we're having." He gestures vaguely at the sky. "Rare occasion when those two will actually agree on something. Then again, she's been out of commission for several days, so I wouldn't hold my breath just yet."

Margo isn't sure what a resident apostate is — an apostate that gets a stipend, maybe? But she looks up at the sky. "What is this? I take it it's not normal?"

Varric gives her a suspicious side glance. "You did hit your head pretty hard, didn't you, Prickly. Well. No, normal is very far from how one might describe it. After the Conclave went up in smoke, along with everyone in it — this thing opened up and it started raining demons. Anyway, I'm the logistics guy — if you want a more philosophical explanation, I'd go harass Chuckles."

Margo nods. Sounds like whatever it is, it works as some kind of portal. To a hell dimension apparently. And it's impossible to believe, of course, except nothing about her predicament is believable either, and as far as explanations go, a hell dimension portal at least fits with the whole "and then my consciousness was ripped out of reality and ended up meat-puppeting a not-quite-human scarred warrior chick who is also, apparently, an elf. And possibly a spy."

"Varric, do you have a sense of where I would have kept my things?"

The man — gnome... dwarf... — shrugs.

"The tents out that way, probably. Though you were with the Nightingale's scouts, and I'm not sure where they're camped out. You should probably report back to her, by the way. She wasn't pleased when they brought you back all... mangled, and whatnot. Said you weren't meant to be out there in

the first place."

Varric deposits her in front of the forge. "We left your weapons with Master Harritt. Lets see if he's already pawned them off to someone else."

The blacksmith is a bald-headed fellow with a red beard and a handlebar mustache. Margo decides he would look especially memorable in a cowboy hat. He gives her a quick look, and then nods, as if answering a question that she didn't know she was asking.

"Got them right here. Sharpened them for you, too. They're nice pieces, not showy, but well balanced. Good steel."

He hands her two sheathed daggers and Margo decides that it would at least be a good idea to make a show of looking like she's used them before. She unsheathes one partially, and tries the blade with her thumb. It is most definitely sharp.

"Thank you for taking care of them, Master Harritt," she offers, politely. The harnesses are simple enough that she manages to strap them onto herself without too much embarrassment. She still notes Varric's curious squint at her fumbling. But it could have been much worse. There's a kind of muscle memory to the motion, where even though she doesn't know off hand how to do it, it is as if her body remembers.

"Don't mention it. You find yourself wanting something fancier, bring me some materials to work with, and I'll see what I can do."

She turns to Varric. "I hate to impose on your time, but would you take me to... Leliana?"

Varric gives her a sly little grin. "You know, Prickly, you sure can talk a fancy line when you want something. Ah, don't mind me. This is what friends are for. But you owe me a beer later."

Margo nods. She decides she likes the dwarf.

"Varric!"

They both turn with a start, and Margo represses the urge to hide behind her escort's back. A tall, dark woman with a large sword at her hip is bearing down on them with the finality of an assault tank.

"Where do you think you are taking her? Her patrol was scouting the Sword Coast before that whole mess with the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Leliana will want this information now — not in some undetermined future."

"Relax, Seeker. We're on it. But she won't be much help quite yet — she seems to have lost her memory."

This gives the formidable woman pause. "Oh. I am sorry. This must be difficult." There's an awkward silence. "I am Seeker Pentaghast."

Margo shakes the outstretched hand, which crushes hers in a steely grip. "A pleasure. I would tell you my name too, but..." she trails off, and shrugs. If you're going to adopt someone else's identity, might as well do it right, she decides.

This earns her a brusque nod and a dismissal.

"Bad blood between you?" she asks Varric.

He chuckles. "Let's just say the Seeker enjoys findings things about me that she can disapprove of."

They make their way through the little town, towards the looming temple at the crest of the hill. Varric points out a tent. "Nightingale's in there somewhere. And that's as far as I go. I like to stay out of out spymaster's way as much as I can."

Margo shoots him a disapproving glance. "Et tu, Brutus," she mumbles, and then catches herself.

"What's that, Prickly?"

"Fine, but now I only owe you a half-pint."

Varric laughs. "Like bargaining with the Carta. I'll catch you later."

Margo watches him waddle down the hill, and she tries to brace herself for what's to come. She has a distinct feeling that this Leliana is not someone to trifle with.

Inside the tent, it is barely warmer than outside. A thin red-headed woman leans over a map fixed to the wooden crate beneath it with a set of daggers. She doesn't turn around when Margo enters. "Ah, it is good of you to come by. Charter spoke highly of you, I would have been disappointed if you had died. Please report on your mission."

Margo finds herself at a loss. There is no way she can bullshit her way out of this one — but then this Leliana isn't likely to tolerate inefficiency. There's nothing quite as sobering as the acute feeling of your own disposability.

"I... I was injured in the last battle, and have lost much of my memories" she tries. The redhead turns around and fixes her with a gaze that could pierce concrete, and then a couple of plates of Kevlar on top of it, just to make sure you knew it wasn't messing around.

"How very convenient for you, isn't it? Especially since the rest of your patrol to the Coast didn't make it. So, you have nothing to say about the Qunari presence there, I suppose?"

Whatever the Qunari are, it is at least quite clear that their presence is not a source of great joy for the spymaster. "No." She tries to think fast. It's funny how that never works out in practice. "Solas claims the memories will be back in time, but until then, I'm afraid I am not much use to you." All things being equal, better to state the truth.

Leliana levels her with a speculative gaze. "Indeed not. But Solas also claimed that you had died, and later claimed that you would not recover, so I would not put too much faith in what the apostate *claims*."

Margo hides a wince. It doesn't require a PhD in history to realize that things aren't going well. The vassal of my vassal and all that. She is too ill informed about this place to navigate the underwater political currents, and if she doesn't learn quickly, she isn't going to last the week.

Leliana leans forward. It isn't exactly looming yet — more like hovering alarmingly. "There are very simple ways to find out whether you are lying. None of them are pleasant, of course. But if you are Charter's creature — as I am sure you are — then you know all of this already and have likely taken measures in anticipation. Unless, that is, you are an agent of the Qun."

With this conclusion delivered, the spymaster considers her with unpleasant interest, much like a crow when it's debating which eye to start plucking out first. Margo feels the ground shifting from under her feet, the unmistakable vertigo of true terror making her limbs go limp and her face turn numb.

"Unless you are simply a pawn in a game, and don't know your own masters... Memory loss can be simulated — up to a degree, of course. But it can also be induced, with magic. Or alchemy. Yes. This is a plausible explanation." Leliana seems to come to a decision then. "I would suggest that you recover your memories, and quickly. I need the information from your patrol. If you fail to do so on your own, you will receive some encouragement from me. Few survive that process. You have three days. I do not recommend trying to run, my spies will find you."

With that, the spymaster turns back to her map.

There is a raven croaking from a nearby roof, its caw distinctly sarcastic.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Leliana, who does not like surprises.

Next up: Margo gets a new job

E is for Elfroot

Chapter Summary

In which Margo avails herself of a job, and then encounters a Herald, a mage, and some local fauna.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Margo walks down the hill in a daze, her heart beating painfully in her chest. Her new body — and she is a bit unsettled by the fact that she is beginning to think of it in proprietary terms — is much better at processing adrenaline than her original one. Good thing, too, because the sense of primordial dread hasn't just set up camp. By this point it's roasting marshmallows and telling dirty jokes.

What is the next step? There appear to be several power brokers here — Leliana and her network of spies is one. Clearly, Seeker Pentaghost and whoever “Curly” is, are in charge of *something*. Solas and Varric appear to be lower on the food chain. She is jolted out of her thoughts by the beginning of a commotion. An elf runs by, screaming something about someone being awake. People rush back and forth in chaotic agitation, like a bunch of ants whose anthill got knocked over. She's jostled to the front of a quickly forming crowd.

Margo watches with the others, as a woman emerges from one of the log houses, and scurries up the hill. She overhears hushed conversations — something about an “Andraste,” prisoners, and something or other having to do with The Breach (audibly capitalized), which she at least knows is the big nasty hellmouth in the sky. Also, some dude named Harold, whoever he is.

The culprit of the social upheaval walks by, and Margo has a chance to get a look at her. Well, she wasn't expecting this. She's human and young — late teens, or perhaps early twenties. Pretty, in a soft sort of way, without the compact, lean hardness of the other soldiers. The girl is wearing some kind of light armor, but it looks out of place, like something more decorative than functional. No one needs a bustier like that if they're trying to slice someone's head off, unless it's meant as a distraction tactic. And she looks... mortified doesn't even begin to cut it.

Margo feels a sudden pang of sympathy. Every incoming freshman class has these girls, with their soft outer shell still so fragile, embarrassed at the slightest sign of attention. It sometimes takes a semester to coax them out, managing class dynamics so that they don't get trampled over by the louder kids in the group. Kids — and at this age, they are still barely out of childhood, really — can be the cruelest little shits when they sense weakness.

This isn't much different, she realizes. And the crowd, for all its awestruck whispers, is heterogeneous. Many stare with open speculation, and a few with downright hostility.

Then the young woman is met by Seeker Pentaghost and a tall blond fellow with a strange sort of fur collar that looks like the beast it came from isn't fully convinced that it should be dead yet. They flank the poor girl, and usher her out of sight, up the path and into the temple looming at the crest of the hill.

The crowd mills about for a bit before dispersing.

Margo decides that her best option is to look for her body's belongings. Maybe there is a convenient and wonderfully detailed diary to be found, one that will expound in details on her host's biography.

Except, of course, she might as well get a divining rod, and go a-looking. She walks around the town, then around the camps a few times, hoping — and dreading — that someone would recognize her. No one does. She asks about Charter, but mostly receives shrugs. She makes eye contact with a few elves, but they just offer harried nods, and go about their business. At length, the sky darkens, and the camp begins to settle for the night. She watches small groups of soldiers walk over to the tavern. Even Varric is nowhere to be seen. Finally, an elven woman who looks like a kitchen worker, and who is hauling a box of carrot-shaped root vegetables takes pity on Margo's undoubtedly miserable expression, and informs her that Charter and her scouts are on patrol for a fortnight, based on the ration schedule.

"Two weeks?" Margo squeaks out, horrified.

"Apologies!" the elf mumbles, and flees.

She sort of stumbles upon the alchemist's hut, more by smell than anything else. The small courtyard is secluded and quiet, but the door remains ajar, letting out light and a stream of mixed odors — bitter and astringent, spicy and acrid, musky and sweet waft through the evening air. She hurries in.

A man is leaning over an alembic, and even if Margo doesn't understand half of it, it's pretty clear he's swearing a blue streak.

"Master Adan?" she tries, hopeful.

"What?" He straightens and looks at her. Tall, dark, and grumpy, that one. And bearded. She wonders what's going on with the shaved head / full beard combo so many of the local men seem to be sporting. This doesn't seem to be a functional decision — if you can get a close shave on your head, why not just go to town and shave the whole thing off?

"Well, don't just stand there. Pass me the reagent — no, not that one, the blue one. Are you blind, lass? That's green. I said *blue*. Yes, the one on the top shelf. Yes, yes, the one with the white sediment at the bottom."

She lifts the correct bottle gingerly. The original one she tried to grab in her panic is perhaps closer to teal, but the difference is subtle. The liquid inside the flask is viscous, with a murky precipitate. She doesn't dare uncork it before she passes it to him, but the alchemist — because that's what he is, a bonafide fucking alchemist in the flesh — doesn't seem to mind. He unstoppers it with his teeth, spits out the cork, and pours a healthy swig of the stuff. Straight down his gullet.

Margo stares. "Should you be drinking the...um...ingredients?" she asks before she can think of a more diplomatic way of phrasing the question.

"No. But they don't pay me enough for this idiocy. Do I look like a healer to you? No. Does this place look like it sources enough elfroot for the amount of soldiers they're getting butchered every day? No. Give me something to blow up, and I'll brew you a mean grenade and you can go blow it up to your heart's content. I didn't sign up to play nursemaid."

Margo looks around. Dry herbs are stacked in large sacks along the wall. Minerals, animal parts,

metal ores, and things that she can't even begin to identify line all available shelf space. A work station of sorts with an alembic, a mortar and pestle, and a calcinator occupy a good part of the single room. She notices a rudimentary mill in the corner.

"You need a hand?"

She's not sure if this is the right move, but what other options are there? And the space has the benefit of being familiar. Not the specific ingredients, perhaps, but the bookcase is full of tomes — quite a few by Auntie Ines, by the looks of it — and there is a very slim chance that her familiarity with her own world's version of alchemy may port, at least to some extent, to whatever this place is. “ *Oh, a degree in early modern history. And what are you going to do with that?* ” Now wouldn't *that* be vindication.

"I need twenty hands, but I'll settle for two. You're a herbalist?"

She frowns, wondering how not to oversell her knowledge without being told to scat. "I dabble."

That seems to satisfy the guy. "Maker's balls, I'll take a dabbler any day over the brainless clods Cullen sends my way. I'm not always sure they can tell a plant from their own ass. Forget trying to get them to bring anything specific — they'll just haul back whatever they stumbled on first. Last week I asked for spindleweed, and one of them brought me *hay* ."

"Can I use your library to get myself up to speed? I... have some memory loss."

Adan's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. " *You're* the contused one? Solas mentioned you, but by the way he described you, I thought you'd be..."

"What?"

He seems embarrassed for a second. "Nothing, don't mind me. No offense, but you people have some strange metaphors."

Well, now she's annoyed. Because what she really needs on top of this otherwise phenomenal day is a bald-pated elf dispensing questionable figures of speech behind her back.

"Did he leave something for me? A tonic?"

"Nope. I usually have standard issue healing potions, but you can learn to brew that yourself in a couple of hours if you don't already know how. You'll need to go gather the elfroot yourself, because I'm almost out. Solas mentioned some fussy draught — for your memory — but I'm swamped, so it ain't gonna happen tonight. Maybe tomorrow we can tackle it." He raises a finger. “ *If you help.* ” And then, for some reason, the alchemist lowers his voice and looks around furtively, as if he is expecting some previously concealed eavesdropper to pop out of the shadows with a triumphant *Aha!* “I'll even pay you, but not much. And I need you on hand, so you'll sleep in the attic.” He crosses his arms over his chest, the posture rather defensive. “You're not afraid of bats, now, are you?"

Margo is so relieved and happy, she could kiss him. "Are you kidding? I adore bats. They are the greatest! There should be more of them! And if you wait for long enough, they'll make shilajit for you."

Adan gives her an incredulous look. "You really are a strange lass, aren't you. They make what, now?"

Margo realizes this is probably not the right time to launch into an exegesis on Himalayan rock oil.

But in for a penny, and all that. "Do you have this stuff? It's very potent — it's this soft dark material that you sometimes find on cave walls. Looks like a mineral, but too soft?"

He gives her a suspicious look, but then his expression clears into something more enthusiastic. "Wait, I knew a trader from Seheron once. He stocked something he called 'Dwarven Oil.' Fantastic stuff. Looks a bit like what you're describing, once you pry it out of the little jars they stuff it into — you say it's made by bats?"

He probably isn't interested in the biochemistry debates over shilajit, so Margo bites her tongue, and makes a non-committal affirmative noise.

"Huh. Well then, you interested? You'll need to get a go ahead from Commander Rutherford, though. And tell him not to send me more of his knuckleheads."

"Yes! I'll work hard, and won't bring you any hay unless you specifically request it."

"Best thing I've heard all day," he grumbles. "Which should tell you how my day's been."

She nods. *You and me both, buddy*, she thinks to herself.

Adan, general grumpiness notwithstanding, is so pleased to have availed himself of a semi-competent helper that he shoves a plate of food at her as soon as it is brought on by a stressed-looking elf. Margo thanks the alchemist — and the young woman — profusely, embarrassing both in the process, and proceeds to scarf down the grub. It's simple stew with bread — nondescript vegetables with unidentified meat — but it tastes like the best thing in the world.

She is really going to have to think about logistics. Although it would seem that she has managed to secure lodging, wages, and food, all in one fell swoop. Not bad for a first day this side of the looking glass.

Maybe after she goes to sleep, she'll actually wake up from this shitshow.

Dinner finished, she walks out of the cabin in search of the aforementioned Commander Rutherford — presumably, the same personage as Varric's "Curly." Before she leaves, she lugs half of Adan's library up to the attic — which is less a testimony to the limited reading materials, and more to her requisitioned body's strength (and to Adan's apparently rather socialist attitude towards his books). She is tempted to simply settle in on the hay mattress and dive in, but it seems like it's a better tactic to play by the rules.

Most of the tomes are by Auntie Ines, and the scholar in her is perplexed by this. Her experience suggests that this place — whatever it is — should have a developed pharmacopeia. By Earth standards, they should be using hundreds of ingredients. Thousands of formulas. They clearly compound. They certainly have the equipment for complex processing, which suggests that the biochemistry of their drugs works by and large the same way. Distillation, calcination — hell, basic pulverization — all seem to proceed along at least somewhat familiar lines. So where is the scholarship? The many authors, the internal debates, the commentaries upon commentaries? The competing traditions? Unless Auntie Ines had some kind of ideological monopoly on the field. Was she a holy woman? Did her writing take on the authority of scripture? Or is Adan just partial to her works? Maybe this is a lineage thing. She should have asked if he had studied under her. Either way, she needs a proper library. And a year sabbatical. Yes, a sabbatical would be nice, then she could really settle in and cross reference this stuff. She won't have a computer to data mine the texts, but with enough time...

She is so absorbed by the prospect of analyzing the hypothetical formularies that she practically collides with the girl.

"Oh Andraste's tears, I am so sorry! I didn't see you! It gets so dark here at night, and I have no idea where the Apothecary is, and oh Maker, I didn't mean to... Oh, you're an elf! Not that I have anything against elves. Bann Trevelyan always says that we must respect the historical debt we owe your people. Oh. I'm making a fool of myself again, aren't I?"

This close up, the young woman is even shorter than Margo originally thought. "And I didn't even introduce myself. I'm Evelyn Trevelyan. But you can call me Evie if you want, everyone else does. At home I mean. Not here. They don't call me Evie here. Just Lady Trevelyan. And now this 'herald' business. Which I guess is better than 'prisoner,' but I keep waiting for someone to get confused and call me Harold Trevelyan. I don't think there were any Harolds, at least not that I remember... Not that I remember very well. Oh."

Margo smiles at her, she hopes reassuringly. "It's nice to meet you, Evie."

"Do... Do you know where the apothecary is? I'm supposed to pick up a tonic from Master Adan, but I haven't met him before, and I don't think I can recognize him based on Commander Cullen's description. Not that Commander Cullen's description is bad, I don't mean that! It's just that he said that Master Adan has a beard and robes. But they all have beards here. And what if he doesn't wear robes all the time. I mean, what if he changes into armor, or something? Then I wouldn't even know what he looks like, and then I'll just be running around asking random men if they're Master Adan, just based on the fact that they have a beard. And oh Maker, there are so many men here, so which one do I start asking first? And they all have beards. Or, at least, mustaches. What if Commander Cullen meant mustache, and not just beard? Does it count if they have just a beard, but not a mustache? If I at least knew what color beard he has, then I'd have somewhere to start, but then, Commander Cullen didn't say anything about color. Am I talking too much? Aunt Lucille says I talk too much, all the time, and that it isn't proper for a Lady, but how am I supposed to know when you're meant to be talking, and when you're meant to not be talking..."

She trails off and kind of deflates, her shoulders slumping and her eyes downcast.

Oh dear. Margo adopts her kindest motherly voice, which her new body's gravely, smoky contralto doesn't lend itself to particularly well. She can probably do sultry like nobody's business. Kind and reassuring? Not so much.

"Evie, slow down, honey. It's all right. Do you want me to introduce you to Adan? I just met him, and he's... very nice."

But Evie, of course, picks up on that slight hitch of hesitation, because kids like her are extremely attuned to social cues, but don't quite know what to do about them yet. "He's not very nice, is he? He's probably really busy, what with all the wounded here. But maybe he's also very busy and not very nice, and then he's going to get mad if I disturb him. There was a wounded soldier I saw, and his wounds just aren't healing, and Solas said it's because sometimes demon wounds fester really fast, and then it gets in the blood and then... and then... and even magic doesn't work... I mean, I don't think Solas is visiting him much, so does that mean he's just going to lay there and not get better, ever? And..." - she whispers this - "And die?"

Hoo, boy. By this point, the girl is sniffing. That is a whole new level beyond "hothouse flower," to cite Varric. That's downright hydroponics. But to be fair, Margo feels for her. Whatever social world she came from, it seems even more removed from this place than Margo's own, if that's even possible.

"Alright, yes. He's not very nice, but that doesn't mean he's not a nice person. He's just sort of... grumpy and overworked. I'll introduce you two, and he's not going to give you any grief with me around." At least she hopes he won't. "You need a healing tonic, right?"

Evie just nods. Margo puts her arm around the girl to guide her back to the apothecary, and Evie leans into her, huddling for warmth as much as reassurance. You poor kid, Margo thinks. Speaking of uprooted and transplanted, she might not be the only one who isn't going to last a week around here.

They walk into the apothecary together. Master Adan is still fiddling with the alembic, and, at this point, Margo has the sneaking suspicion that he is using it for distinctly non-medicinal purposes, unless one counts moonshine as an analgesic. After all, an alembic is just a fancy word for a still.

"Master Adan? This is Evelyn Trevelyan, and she needs a healing potion."

"She does, does she?" Yup, the grumpiness factor has not gone down since the last time she saw him. Master Adan strikes her as a belligerent drunk. "Well, tough nug nuggets! I am all out. Which brings me to the whole point of our arrangement — I need more elfroot! So make yourself useful. Here, that can be your first assignment. Go gather some, boil a draught, and give it to her Ladyship here."

At this, he turns back to his moonshine experiments.

Interesting class dynamics. The spymaster would probably want to know about the grumbling proletariat, but Margo's not about to tattle to this world's female version of Comrade Beria any time soon.

She assumes they've been summarily dismissed, but no. "Oh, and while you're at it. Master Taigan was working on something before the old man went off to meet his Maker. His house is out that way." Adan gestures vaguely in what is certainly an entirely random direction. "See if you can find some of his notes, and bring them back. He's got elfroot growing around there somewhere, too — how that thing manages on this snowy rock is beyond me, but who cares."

Margo exchanges a glance with Evie who looks equal measures terrified and demoralized. She winks at the girl, hoping Master Adan doesn't notice.

They walk outside. The little courtyard is so dark the walls of the nearby houses are barely visible. Overhead, the stars are faint — the glow from the hellmouth cyclone overpowers everything.

"We should probably wait until tomorrow morning to venture out, right?" Evie looks torn. "I think Solas is going to be really mad at me if I don't do as he says and drink the medicine, though. But..." She hesitates, and starts fiddling with the hem of her not very practical armor. Who the hell wants to fight in a corset, anyway? "Do you think it's really far, this house? Like, maybe it's not that far, and we can just go there really quickly. But wait, what if it's outside the enclosure? And what if there are beasts there. Like bears. Do you think there might be bears?"

Margo considers this. "Not this close to the camp. Even if there were bears, I'm going to bet they've all been killed, skinned, and eaten. Oh, I should ask Adan if he uses bear bile. That's a good one, bear bile. Common in most pharmacopoeias, unless you have some compunctions about using animal parts, which I don't think he does..."

She catches herself. Evie looks downright crestfallen. "I'm scared of bears. They're big, and they have these huge claws, and Bann Trevelyan says they are very dirty claws, so even when the bear just scratches you..."

"Alright. How about this..." Margo weighs her options. It's not like she has much of a chance to stand up to a bear — or anything else of the large carnivorous persuasion — but in the grand scheme of things, all the large carnivores in the vicinity would have been either driven out, or put to good use. "I owe Varric half a pint, but I don't have any money to buy it. So you and I are going to make a deal. You're going to have a drink with him in my stead, and I'm going to go look for elfroot and this Taigan fellow's notes on whatever he was playing around with. And if I find them, then we'll go to Master Adan, and you're going to give him the notes, so he gets off his high horse and stops being a colossal asshat to you."

Evie giggles. And then snuffles again. "I've never heard this expression. It's funny. Is it Elvhen? Because it'd be kind of silly to put a hat on your butt, right? I mean, how would you hold it in place? You'd have to wander around sort of holding on to it, or it'll fall off. But I guess your butt would be warm, at least."

She sighs wistfully. The kid is so not dressed for the weather. "Let's get you out of the cold, sweetheart. I bet Varric is already in the tavern."

Her guess is correct. The tavern — small, hot, and packed to the gills — does, in fact contain Varric, seated at a table in the far corner. He is surrounded by a small crowd of soldiers, all of them well into their cups and laughing uproariously at some yarn the dwarf is spinning. Margo notices that he talks with his hands a lot.

"Prickly!" Varric calls out from his seat. "Came by to pay your dues?"

Margo guides Evie to take a seat on the bench next to the dwarf. "Varric, you've met Evelyn Trevelyan, right?"

He smiles amiably enough, but it doesn't quite make it all the way to his eyes. It clicks, then. He's watching people very carefully, even as he distracts them with the whole jovial life-of-the-party shtick. Tricky tricky.

"I need to run an errand before I can come by. Would you mind keeping Evie company while I'm gone? I don't think it should take me more than an hour. And if it does, then send the rescue team, because I probably got into trouble."

Evie looks horrified at this.

"Yeah, yeah. Anything to get out of a debt. You sure you're not with the Carta?"

"As a matter of fact, since you bailed on me earlier, you technically owe *me* a half-pint."

Varric snorts into his beer, and then he looks at her, eyes narrowed. "Forget the Carta. You're sure you're not secretly a dwarf, Prickly?"

The table explodes with laughter, and one of the soldiers claps Margo on the back. However different this world is, she gets this dynamic, the easy camaraderie. They're all working their asses off, and they get exhausted and unwind by drinking too much, because their lives are too precarious for thinking too far out into the future. They all walk through life with death on their heels.

"I'm good on my word, Varric. I'll come back in an hour, and you'll get your damn drink."

He looks reasonably appeased by this, so Margo jostles her way out into the night.

The air outside is bitter cold, but at least the snow has stopped. The first person she runs into gives her directions to Master Taigan's old hut. Margo sets off at a comfortable run, enjoying her host body's athletic ease. She's still hoping that she won't run into any unwanted encounters on the way, but the night is encouragingly quiet, safe for the distant howling of something that very well might be wolves. But the sound appears remote, and in about fifteen minutes following a narrow path in the snow, she comes up on a log house.

Several tall vine-like creepers — that have absolutely no business standing upright based on their morphology — are growing out of the snowy crust around the cabin. Margo pulls out Auntie Ines's Compendium for a quick check. Sure enough, the gravity-defying flora is elfroot, if the stylized illustration is anything to go by.

Margo doesn't have a sack to gather them, but she wagers Master Taigan probably has something she can use. She tries the handle and cheers quietly when the door turns out to be unlocked. The inside is dusty, a rich botanical smell lingering in the habitation. She trails her fingers along the top of a counter and brings her fingertips to her nose. Sure enough, the dust is mostly plant matter, still odorous. One room has a different smell, sharp in a chemical way, like saltpeter and sulfur. Was Master Taigan experimenting with gunpowder? Notes are scattered everywhere. Margo begins to gather them, until she spots a knapsack lying in a corner. She empties it out, throwing the crumbling plant residue into the unlit fireplace, and she proceeds to stuff the writings inside the bag, with a quick mental note to go over them before handing them off to Evie. A cell phone camera would come in handy. She winces. This is going to have a steep learning curve.

She finds several empty burlap sack in the other room, folded neatly on top of a crate. Margo grabs one before leaving the house with a small pang of regret. The bookshelves are full of books. She wonders if it would be a faux pas to appropriate a few. Hell, she wouldn't mind requisitioning the entire house to herself. Unless this is where Adan is staying when he is not getting sloshed on dubious booze. Although why he would send her for the notes if this is where he actually lives is beyond her. Perhaps he has another place in the camp. How many houses can one alchemist have?

Outside, she makes quick work of the elfroot, using one of her daggers to dig the plants out of the frigid ground, after a mental apology to Master Harritt. Her hands quickly go numb from the cold, and by the time the burlap sack is three-quarters full, Margo is chilled to the bone and shivering. She's not sure how much time has passed, so she decides to head back, because turning into an icicle from over-enthusiastic herbalism would be a pretty damn stupid way to die. The knapsack sits awkwardly over her dagger harnesses, but she needs both hands to carry her botanical haul.

The howling picks up again, much closer this time. Best not linger. Margo breaks into a light jog, trying to follow the same path she used before. She can see more stars now, none of them arranged into familiar patterns.

There is a flash of yellow — then another one, off to the left, close to the flank of the hill that frames her path. She picks up speed, a sudden jolt of fear icing her spine. Two shadows separate from the darkness at the bottom of the slope and begin to glide apace with her, some twenty feet away, but on a narrowing trajectory. Shit shit shit. The snow is hindering her progression, her footing unsure on the slippery ice crust.

Another flash of yellow catches her gaze — this one straight ahead — and then a deep, low howl resonates somewhere to her right, from the direction of the ravine.

She's being herded.

The adrenaline gives her a jolt of energy, but Margo's not naïve enough to think she can outrun a wolf pack. As far as bad decisions go, this one is proving remarkably stupid. This is how one

doesn't even make it into the footnotes.

Something blue gleams ahead, and then a purple jolt of electricity that looks quite a bit like a lightning bolt strikes the ground ahead of her. The pyrotechnics are followed by a distinctly lupine yelp, and she feels rather than sees a dark outline bound off in the direction of the ravine. No doubt to complain to its comrades about the unpredictable weather.

She pushes her body to move faster in the hopes that the old adage holds true, and lightning doesn't strike twice in the same spot — and she runs smack into a familiar elf with a large wooden stick. For a split second, in the dwindling blue afterglow that surrounds him, he looks ethereal. Of course, in practice, it turns out that he isn't. When momentum carries her forward, the impact is anything but ghostly.

They do an awkward sort of twirl where they both try to keep each other standing, but the entire enterprise fails, and Margo slips and collapses on her back, dragging the elf down with her. He lands on top of her with a soft "oof", nose to nose. The fellow is distinctly more solid than he looks. They stare at each other for a split second, and Margo vaguely registers that he has a rather charming dimple on his chin, and a sliver of a scar on his forehead. And then the elf makes a flustered sound and rolls off her, scrambling to his feet and adopting a fighting stance. She follows him up, but not knowing what a fighting stance might look like in her case, bounces on the balls of her feet.

"I really think we should just run."

He doesn't seem to find much fault with that argument, and they scramble up the path. There is a sort of glowing circle around him that seems to maintain pace with them, and Margo wonders — a bit dementedly — if he's carrying glow sticks under his tunic. Until her brain is forced to accept the idea that this is some kind of magic.

They skid into the camp's enclosure, both winded and gulping for air. At least the howling, while unmistakably displeased by this turn of events, remains well behind them.

"Have you..." he gasps "...lost all common sense, along with your memories?"

She wants to argue with him, but... Well. He's not exactly wrong. Instead, Margo waves her burlap sack — which she is still clutching in a death grip — by way of an explanation. "I got carried away."

The bald elf does not seem appeased by this. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"Carried away? *Carried away* ? One gets carried away looking at beautiful things. Or poring over an old tome of ancient knowledge. One gets carried away at a lover's touch. One does *not* get 'carried away' stuffing *plants* in a *sack* ."

Margo blinks at this tirade. "You are taking this somewhat personally."

He exhales in frustration, and turns away, chin high, jaw clenched. The pose is kind of ridiculous, as far as pantomimes of displeasure go, but... It looks fairly organic on him. After a few seconds, his stance softens a bit. "I take this personally because I did not go through the trouble of putting you back together from your rather disassembled state only to see you subsequently ripped apart by wolves."

Which, of course, begs the question of why he went through said trouble. Some kind of Homo Elveticus solidarity? Unless, of course, this elf and her host body have a history. Could this be the

case? He did just mention lovers, which, as far as the whole tirade went, was a bit of a non sequitur. But he hadn't acted like they were particularly familiar earlier.

"I apologize. I... am not quite myself these days. Did we know each other well before I lost my memories?"

He squints at her, suddenly cautious. "About as well as any of the strangers assembled here." There is something assessing to his expression, like he is trying to figure out what might be inside a locked box just by shaking it.

Well, that is as vague a statement as it gets. How familiar *are* the locals with each other? Margo frowns. Maybe this is a cult. Because if there's anything that could improve this day even more, it's most certainly cultists.

"What were you doing all the way out there? I, at least, have an excuse." She waves her sack again. The elf, bless him, looks only more disgusted.

"And a poor one at that. Can Adan not send some of Cullen's men to do the grunt work?"

"They tend to bring him... the wrong things."

The elf — who goes by Solas, Margo recalls — cocks an eyebrow, and for a second there is a sparkle of humor in his eyes, which, in the unsteady light of the torches, shine darkly. Whatever humor tried to sprout, it is smothered under more peevishness. "I enjoy walking outside of the confines of Haven. It clears the mind," he volunteers.

She examines him more closely. What is going on with all these people not dressed for the weather? But he doesn't seem to be suffering from the cold. In fact, he is walking around by and large barefoot. If this is a habit, his feet should look more like hooves, but they seem fine. Not even particularly blue. This climate resistance doesn't seem to be a species feature either, because Margo is still freezing, despite warm clothes and their recent run.

"Anyway." She clears her throat. Minimally, it would behoove her to be polite. He did, in fact, help her — twice, now. "I should thank you. Both for patching me up, and for the assist with the wolves. Is there anything you need? Varric mentioned that you were overwhelmed with too many patients. Are you a healer?"

"Yes, Master Tethras does have a tendency to 'mention' things." The elf doesn't seem too impressed by this fact. "To answer your question, no — healing magic is not my specialty. But I must admit that I am confused by your offer." At this, he steps closer, apparently searching her face for something. He doesn't go as far as to take her chin in his hand and start tilting her head every which way, but there's something about his body language that suggests he's sorely tempted to do just that. "You are not a city elf. You speak too confidently, you do not defer and cower and apologize at every second, even when you are clearly at fault. But where is your Vallaslin? I thought, perhaps, it was too faint to see — a lighter hue — but it would appear you truly are unclaimed."

"I can't answer that question," Margo says. Because, obviously, she can't. She has no clue what a Vallaslin is, though evidence seems to suggest that it's either warrior paint, or, more likely, a facial tattoo. She doesn't like the sound of "unclaimed" one bit, though. Are Vallaslins some kind of brand?

Hell on a stick, are these slaver cultists? Cultist slavers?

"Because you cannot remember, or because you are unwilling? You are one of Leliana's scouts, are you not? Are you bound by the rules of your guild?"

Margo tries to think on her feet. One way or another, she needs to learn about her host's life. If she cannot find her things — or if her host's things don't have anything useful by way of information that might appease Comrade Nightingale — the rest of her life here is going to be nasty, brutish, and short. Unless... What it really boils down to, is whether or not she should trust this Solas character.

Well. He *did* help, for whatever reason.

"I truly cannot remember. And I need to, because otherwise Leliana will go digging for the information she wants, and she didn't seem to think I'd particularly enjoy the process."

At that Solas makes a surprised little noise that sounds an awful lot like a chuckle. "Indeed, I would imagine you would not."

"And in the interest of not wasting your labor in putting me back in a single piece, I was wondering if you knew of anything that might... jolt a body's memories?"

He narrows his eyes at her. "*A body's* memories? That is a rather curious formulation. Do you not mean *your* memories?"

She shrugs. "That's a philosophical question, isn't it? Are our memories stored in our bodies, or our spirit? If they're stored entirely in our spirit, then how do you account for muscle memory, or any other embodied skill?"

He looks surprised, and then, slowly, his expression turns intrigued. "That is an interesting question. Even if the spirit is damaged beyond the point where its experiences could be restored, perhaps the body retains an imprint of the spirit's life. I will have to consider this." He taps his chin, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet, and Margo smiles to herself. She knows that look. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the look of intellectual curiosity. She can work with that.

"It's a plausible theory, isn't it? So even if parts of a person's spirit are damaged, the body might store something of its past experiences, even if they aren't tinged with emotions or particular context, I suppose."

She smiles at him, because damn, for a second, this is so familiar that it almost feels like her old normal — however brief the reprieve, it's actually pleasant to be able to simply stand there, forget about her outlandish predicament, and debate cosmological models.

The look of curiosity on the elf's face turns into something almost close to pleasure, and he returns her smile. It's a nice smile, she decides. Sweet, and a little cheeky. Then his expression shutters. "It would explain why the Tranquil retain their skills."

The euphoria fades as quickly as it manifested. This isn't a model. It's her new reality. Since she has no idea what he means, Margo just nods. The cogs are clearly turning in his head, and she doesn't want to interrupt this process lest she loses the opportunity to get some valuable insight on a possible solution to her problem.

"I cannot help but notice that your use of the term 'spirit' is somewhat... unusual. Do you mean *any* spirit?"

Uh-oh. They're getting into murkier waters. But if she can get herself relocated into an entirely different body and realm, and still, somehow, function...

"Theoretically? Yes, why not. Though my guess would be that the longer a body is separated from its spirit – again, hypothetically speaking — the more difficult it would be to retrieve anything useful."

The elf gives her a very odd look, his expression suddenly guarded. Oh, shit, what did she say? She makes herself shrug. "You mentioned it yourself — I did die out there."

"You appear to be very much alive now," he offers after a pause.

Margo suppresses a frown. She has the distinct feeling that there is another part to his utterance, one he chose to keep to himself.

Is he... flirting?

"Alive, yes, but missing some relevant bits, apparently."

His lips twitch, and the spark of humor settles in his eyes. At this point, she should probably be alarmed at the warm and fuzzy sensation his expression sends down her spine, but she's too focused on trying to maneuver him into another bout of altruism to really consider her reaction too closely.

"I must admit, I was not expecting this evening to end on a conversation about the hermeneutics of memory, but..." Another half-smile. "Well, I will take a pleasant surprise where I can."

"Beats being eaten by wolves." Margo grins. "And any time you want to debate hermeneutics, you let me know."

He chuckles softly at that. This time, there is no denying it — that feeling of tingly warmth at the quiet, smooth sound of it. Oh no no no. No developing crushes on random bookish elves that save you and your elfroot from the wolves. Bad brain... spirit... body...whatever.

She forces herself to snap back to the task at hand, which is to find out about the memory thing, and for a second she feels a little crass for pumping him for information. But he doesn't seem to mind, exactly, so perhaps no harm no foul. "So how would you go about it? What if my spirit is too badly damaged to recover the memories I need to... appease Leliana, especially not in three days. Is there a way to get these from my body, instead?"

She's hoping he'd point her to a formula – or, if she's really lucky maybe even a single ingredient. But instead he considers her, his eyes narrowed, expression hard again.

"She gave you only three days to recover?"

Margo shrugs. "Not very long, is it?"

"Long enough to see whether you will attempt to flee." He hesitates, then appears to come to a decision. "There is perhaps a way that I might help. It would be best, however, if we kept this out of public view."

Margo narrows her eyes. "Why? What would it entail?"

It is the elf's turn to shrug. "I came to Haven to volunteer my services, but I am still an apostate — though I suppose all mages are now technically apostates. Still, it would be preferable if we did not remind those in power of this fact. You will need to brew a draught beforehand, then come visit me tomorrow evening. Do you have anything to write on?"

She reaches into her coat and extracts the Compendium. He takes it from her, flips it to the last page, and then produces a piece of graphite from his pocket. He writes quickly. Margo leans in, reading the neat scroll.

"I am not certain that my recollection of the exact proportions is correct, but Master Adan might know it. If not, experiment. The draught should taste like a regeneration potion, but with more bite and a cloying aftertaste."

So, first things first, she will need to find out what a regeneration potion tastes like. "What does it do?"

He considers this. "My hope is that it would both enhance the efficacy and lessen the ill-effects of a spell."

Margo swallows, her throat suddenly dry. "And what spell are we talking about?"

He hesitates for a moment. "One that I learned during my travels through the Fade — a ritual performed to ease a spirit's passing, or its transformation. It draws on the surrounding environment to solidify the spirit's essence, and helps it to recall itself before it passes on. It may be possible to replicate it using a physical body, instead of the Fade's landscape, though I should warn you that I have never attempted it."

Sounds like something shamanic. Except, of course, the magic here seems a lot more material and immediate than in her world. But a ritual? She can work with a ritual.

"Sounds like a plan to me."

This time, he looks genuinely surprised — and not a little suspicious. "And you would trust an apostate you barely know to do this?"

Margo lifts a shoulder in a shrug. "Well, I believe you've already seen me naked. What's a little ritual?"

"It was in a medical capacity," he bristles, but the tips of his ears turn pink

She suppresses a smile. "So is this. And considering my best options are that or wandering around the camp at random to look for my things that may or may not contain anything useful, I'll take my chances. Seriously, if I were a spy, then how likely is it that I kept a detailed memoir of all my comings and goings conveniently tucked away in some knapsack?"

Solas has recovered from his mild embarrassment and is chuckling again, and yes, the warm fuzzies are turning into a conditioned reflex. Oh fuck, no, she doesn't need this.

"I would wager, rather low, unless you were terrible at your chosen occupation."

"Let's play it safe, and assume I was at least reasonably competent, then. So, I will see you tomorrow evening. And now, if you will excuse me, I have to take care of Lady Trevelyan, because I left her with Varric, and she is either drunk, or horribly embarrassed, or likely both."

Solas nods, but his expression is back to aloof. As she passes him, he calls after her with a rather dry "goodnight."

So, the elf is mercurial, to boot. Good to know.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by tough nug nuggets. And bear bile, which has been traditionally used to treat liver and gall bladder problems, though there are much more humane, cruelty-free alternatives. But this is Thedas, and if they're using bears to make armor, then lets not have the bile go to waste.

Up next: Bubble bubble toil and trouble.

Good Samaritan

Chapter Summary

In which Margo makes friends, and a couple of enemies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Margo drops off her botanical ransom in the apothecary, then proceeds to the tavern. When she enters, everything is more or less where she left it. Varric is still holding forth, with Evie next to him. The kid is not at all embarrassed — probably because she is most definitely drunk. She is flushed with the warmth — and the booze — and sandwiched between Varric and another soldier, who looks to Margo’s critical eye to be middle-aged, handsome in a dollar store romance novel sort of way — and all kind of bad news. A “wham bam thank you ma’am” kind of fellow. Margo narrows her eyes from across the floor. Bad Boy Jack appears to be on a mission, too.

For a moment, Margo considers whether adopting the role of the mother figure to Baby Trevelyan is a particularly wise idea — it doesn’t take a genius to realize that anyone in the kid’s immediate orbit would find themselves in the limelight of popular attention. In Margo’s case, distinctly *unwanted* attention. Then again, no one else at the table seems to be noticing that Bad News is slipping the girl drinks.

No Good Samaritan shall be left unpunished, but such is life. She marches over. There is nowhere to sit, so she leans a hip against the side of the table.

Varric looks up. “Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in.” He squints theatrically, and cocks his head to the side. “Strange, Prickly, I don’t see an ale.”

“I thought we established that you’re the one who owes me one.”

Varric clicks his tongue disapprovingly. “Still trying to trick an old dwarf.”

Before she can come up with some clever repartee, the door swings open, letting in a flurry of snowflakes, Seeker Pentaghast, and a fellow she assumes to be Commander Cullen. Both look terribly out of place. The assembled company experiences the social equivalent of a hiccup — chair legs scrape against the floorboards, backs crack as they snap to attention, armor clanks with the effort to clean or straighten it. The ambient din goes down a couple of notches. A few of the soldiers at their table scuttle off, suddenly remembering some important business that needs immediate attention. Margo uses the opportunity to snag a seat in front of Evie.

Bad Boy Jack to Evie’s right looks up, gives Margo an assessing once-over, clearly decides that she isn’t the prize of the evening, and winks.

The commanding officers make a beeline for their table, and Margo belatedly concludes that they are probably there to collect Lady Trevelyan.

Evie’s eyes widen in panic, probably because this little escapade was all well and good, until the authority figures showed up.

“Varric Tethras. I should have known we would find you here. And with the Herald, no less.” If lightning bolts could strike on demand, Varric would be electrified toast. Come to think of it, they can, which makes Margo conclude that this particular trick is not in the Seeker’s repertoire. It poses an interesting question — clearly, not everyone here is a... well. A “mage.” (The word itself still costs her a mental stumble, but Margo decides to file it away as an emic term for the time being.) Whether being a mage is a matter of innate capability or training is entirely unclear. Is one “born” with magic? Or can anyone dabble in it, and mages are only the professional designation?

And then there’s the problem of apostasy — Solas mentioned something about all mages being “apostates.” What sort of religious doctrine did they renounce, exactly — and why did they do it collectively, which is what “now” seems to imply? Does the Hellmouth have something to do with it? Did mages cause it?

Are they worshipping it? Here’s to hoping they’re not worshipping it, because the next logical step is Kool-aid cocktails.

Varric leans back, in a casual pose clearly meant to antagonize. “*Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast, number seventy eight in line to the Nevarran throne, entered the seedy tavern.*” He switches his tone from declamative to casual. “To what do we owe this honor, Seeker?”

Cassandra — since that’s apparently the warrior woman’s name — looks like she wants to fire back something biting, but it doesn’t fly off the tongue. “Ugh,” she says instead, in such cosmic disgust and naked frustration that Margo finds herself looking quickly between the dwarf and the warrior. Varric, for his part, looks pleased as punch. Perhaps someone should do the two a favor and check if the tavern might have rooms available.

The conversational impasse that follows affords Margo the opportunity to get a better look at Commander Cullen. Once you get past the disconcerting collar, the man is classically attractive — in a mild and overly symmetrical kind of way. Add to that the slight wistfulness — though it could just be plain old discomfort — and you get a pretty pleasant first impression. Of course, appearances could be deceiving. For a second, he reminds her a bit of Jake, just a tad older and obviously more battle-worn. The thought of her brother uppercuts her into the worst pang of nostalgia she’s had since coming to this impossible world — wherever the hell it is — and, to her horror, Margo feels the telltale prickle of tears making their way up her sinuses.

She makes herself sneeze before the tears can shed. Faces turn to her, and Margo forces a casual grin that feels like a shoddy plastering job. “Catching a cold, I think. We don’t have enough mages to change the climate either, do we?”

This earns her a puzzled look from Cullen, and a steely one from Cassandra. “No. In fact, we do not have enough mages, period, and barely enough of anything else. But this does not seem to prevent certain people from wasting their time getting drunk and telling tall tales.”

“You wound me, Seeker. I never lie. The correct term is artistic embellishment,” Varric drawls. Half-hidden in the expansive display of chest hair, a gold chain thick as Margo’s thumb catches the light. Cassandra looks like she wants to tackle him.

Evie chooses this moment to hiccup, and then slams her hand against her mouth, her eyes rounding in horror. Even her eyelids are red from the sudden blush.

Bad News smiles into his fist, and clears his throat. “May I escort her Ladyship to her dwelling? It’s getting late,” he offers.

Cassandra narrows her eyes. “Messere Bordelon, is it?”

Bad News tenses, but smiles anyway — the smile is roguish. And well honed, Margo decides. “Just Jan nowadays.”

It would seem that Bad News has some clout behind his name. Margo bristles. Oh, no you don’t. “I’ll do it!” she blurts out before she can think better of it — instead of doing the prudent thing, and keeping her mouth shut, and her eyes down.

Margo finds herself in the crosshairs of Seeker Pentaghost’s heavy stare and represses the desire to fidget. The warrior nods once. “Good, do that.”

She gets up, and helps Evie extricate herself from her seat. Bad News shoots her an irritated look. Margo greets this with a raised eyebrow that she hopes conveys in no uncertain terms that she intends to take her new assignment of cockblocker-in-chief seriously.

The girl is predictably a bit wobbly. Margo grabs her elbow in a firm grip, and they begin their progression to the door.

“Don’t forget you still owe me an ale, Prickly. I’m going to start charging interest.”

“I’ll buy you a pitcher next time,” Margo shoots back.

“Promises, promises,” the dwarf chuckles.

They make it outside without further incidents. She relies on Evie to guide her back to the house she occupies, but the girl seems a little lost.

“Commander Cullen is so handsome, isn’t he?” the kid whispers suddenly. Even the whisper is just a tad slurred.

Margo blinks. Oh, unmerciful and unspecified local deity, but this is bad. “Sweetheart, how much have you had?” If they’ve made it to boy talk already, this bodes poorly for the kid’s blood alcohol content. She’s young and will probably just sleep it off, but how much experience does she have with getting sloshed? Considering the general state of affairs, this world is unlikely to fuss over legal drinking age, but Evie is so very clearly sheltered. So the most probable answer is “not much experience at all.”

“To drink? I am not sure. That nice man to my right... Jan? Jon? He just kept bringing these really yummy drinks, with funny names. Like The Antivan Lover, and The Parapet Gambler. Why would someone want to gamble a parapet, anyway?”

Margo groans. “I just bet he did.” To be filed under “improve Bad News’s stew with a secret ingredient.” Like, say, a purgative. Or an emetic. And kick Varric’s ass for not putting his foot down. “How old are you, kid? Have you had much ale or wine before?” Assessing the girl’s tolerance seems like the first step. Wasn’t there something on alcohol poisoning in Auntie’s Compendium? Or maybe it was just poisonings more generally.

“I will be twenty two next month,” Evie announces. “But Bann Trevelyan says I should avoid becoming inebriated at all costs, because of my ‘nervous constitution.’ And because ‘women who indulge in intoxicants are unseemly.’”

Margo cuts her a side glance. She’d like to have a stern talk with this Bann Trevelyan about the dangers of over-sheltering. Heavens preserve them all from demons, hellmouths, and helicopter parents. “‘Unseemly’, eh?”

Before she can begin to start punching holes through Bann Trevelyan’s opinion of women, they

have another problem. Evie gets a little green around the gills, her large blue eyes filling with alarmed confusion.

“I think I feel a little funny...”

And this is how Margo finds herself holding Lady Evelyn Trevelyan’s hair as the kid pukes by the smithy. She pats her back reassuringly. “That’s good, hon. Healthy response, right there.”

The rest of the walk is predictable. After getting rid of most of the alcohol in her stomach, Evie begins to sober up — and descends into embarrassed misery. Margo finds herself alternating between whispering reassuring platitudes and gently scolding. Mercifully, Haven is small, and they make it back to Evie’s house, where Margo pours a mug of water from a clay jug, forces the kid to drink it all, and tucks her into bed.

She sits on the bed next to the girl. “I’m going to be back tomorrow morning with your medicine and Taigan’s notes, and then you and I are going to deliver them to Master Adan. And that’ll be all done with.”

“I made a fool of myself back there, didn’t I?” The kid’s lower lip trembles. “Did I say embarrassing things? I’m sure I said embarrassing things.”

“You’re fine. Sleep it off.”

“You’re not mad at me, are you?”

Margo winces. How the hell did she find herself the designated caretaker for Baby Trevelyan is beyond her, but, again, someone’s got to do the job. “No, hon. I’m not mad at you at all.”

Evie doesn’t look convinced.

“You should have seen me the first time I got drunk. In comparison, you were downright regal back there.”

This revelation earns Margo a tentative smile and a sniffle. “What did you do?”

“Got in a fight, broke a boy’s nose, fell off a roof. Puked a lot. Not necessarily in that order. Ugh. Plum liquor.” Margo shudders. “Why are they all fussing over you, anyway? I mean, I don’t mean that as an offense, I think you’re delightful, but... Everyone seems somehow vested in you beyond what I would assume is regular nobility etiquette.”

Evie pulls the blanket over herself, and puts her left hand on her lap. It’s faintly greenish, but only at a certain angle.

“It’s because of this. I can... it can... close the rifts. Holes. Whatever green things, with the demons.” The kid frowns. “Don’t you remember? You were there when that demon... and the really huge hole... And I tried, but it didn’t work, and now there are all those little rifts everywhere, and the one big one — and I don’t remember how it even happened to me either! Except the Divine, she...she... So I thought you’d understand, because you don’t remember too, and I thought that maybe... Maybe if we both don’t remember, then at least it’s not just me...”

And then the kid bursts into loud, heartbroken sobs, with big fat tears rolling down her cheeks, and Margo finds herself hugging her tight, and stroking her hair, and telling her that it’ll all be all right, somehow, and that she’ll be there for her, and that they’ll get through this shitshow together. The lies taste bitter as they roll off her tongue, because if there ever was a more unequipped person to play guardian angel to the potential savior of the world, she’d be hard-pressed to find one.

By the time she makes it back to the Apothecary, it's snowing, and she's exhausted. She climbs to the attic and collapses on her hay pallet. Despite the exhaustion, sleep eludes her. She keeps drifting off, but each time she dreams of falling down a dark pit, a malevolent presence rushing by, and a body — no longer her own — morphs into something that will never again have room for her. And then she's a spirit adrift, a meaningless scrap with nowhere to go, untethered and hurling through the great hollow emptiness of space...

At the rooster's first crow, which she vaguely recalls usually happens around four in the morning, Margo gives up on the sleeping enterprise, and gets up. She goes down in search of tea. Adan's nowhere in sight, so Margo concludes that the alchemist doesn't stay in the apothecary overnight.

She makes herself at home, sticking her nose into every jar until she finds something that smells vaguely tea-like. It looks to be flowers, so at least she's unlikely to poison herself — safer than using some random roots, in any case. The jar is not labeled. She fishes out a single dry flower, examines it more closely, then she pops it into her mouth and chews thoughtfully. It's a little sweet, and a little minty, with a hint of hops.

Auntie's Compendium has pictures of live flora, but not dry materials. Still, the flower is distinct enough for her to identify it with relative ease. Amrita Vein. She squints at the drawing. It looks a bit... phallic. Morphology notwithstanding, Margo wonders at the coincidence of the plant's name, the Sanskrit cognate of nectar, and, incidentally, immortality. It seems both vaguely blasphemous and satisfying to boil her tea with the alien plant. She settles into a chair, and leafs through Auntie's book, sipping the concoction. It's not half-bad. Like fireweed tea, but sweeter, with a mentholated finish. Sure enough, there is Amrita's story in there. A hedge witch who failed to die after being abandoned by Templars in the desert. Typical.

She flips the pages to the entry for elfroot, and Auntie Ines — nothing if not thorough — included a list of formulas, in addition to the lore she collected about the plant. The hard-earned elfroot in the burlap sack seems to be of the bitter variety. There's also something called Royal Elfroot, probably on account of its purplish leaves.

Because nothing says Royal like a purple trim.

Margo props the book open, and leaves it on the workstation for consultation.

After that, it's smooth sailing. She goes rummaging for dawn lotus — which, in her humble opinion, looks more like a water lily — and locates a good-sized sack of it with a triumphant "Aha!"

Master Adan really needs to invest in some labels.

The next two hours are spent cleaning the elfroot, and then drying it next to the fire. She should have done it the night before, after collecting it, but she'd had a rather busy day, so Margo cuts herself some slack. The formulary does not specify whether the plant needs to be dried, but she knows from experience that it is much easier to grind up a dry plant. The work is meditative, and Margo's thoughts drift. Flashes of childhood float up like soap bubbles. The pounding motion that crushes the leaves is familiar — though this familiarity is not of this body, but of her mind. Or spirit — whatever that might be.

It is the same motion that Baba taught her, and she has a vivid memory of the old woman — her dark hands, veined and gnarled with age, smell of mint and lemon balm. They work a pestle in circular motions. Baba smells like home — like nothing else ever has, or will. Everything about

Baba is dark and high-contrast — the kerchief with the oversized flowers that holds her long black hair up, barely salted with white even at eighty. The strong jaw line; the nose, hooked and narrow like a bird's beak; the deep-set graphite grey eyes with their bursts of crow's feet. The net of wrinkles, like a spiderweb. *Don't fret, my soul.* She hears the old woman's voice, soothing, cracked, humorous. *There is nothing that your Baba doesn't have a little herb for.* Margo is twelve or thirteen, and nursing her very first heartbreak. It feels bigger than the whole world. *You can never be lonely when you make friends with the little herbs.*

Margo wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. No point in faking bravado. She lets the tears fall as they will — trying to not water the herbal mixture too much. If she's going to have a meltdown, she might as well do it in the privacy of the apothecary. But mourning her lost world won't bring it back, or bring her back into it, and besides, there is no more Baba to run to. That time is gone for good.

Eventually, the tears stop, and the heartbreak eases a fraction.

The rest of the work is in careful measuring and weighing. She finds a nice little scale, with its collection of metal weights tucked neatly into matching sockets in a velvet case.

By the time she goes to fetch more snow for melting, the sky is taking on the piercing lapis hue of pre-dawn. Margo packs some clean snow into a ball and carries it back, then she stuffs it into the large cast iron pot over the fire and waits for it to boil.

When the sky turns a bright custard yellow, Master Adan rolls into the shop. Margo has a nice little collection of healing potions by then, all lined up and labeled — though writing with a bird feather didn't do her handwriting any favors. The liquid tastes abrasively bitter, but it's a good bitter — the kind of bitter that tells you “yes, I am very good for you, have some more.” Margo downed half a vile — because what good scientist doesn't experiment on herself — and she feels good. Really good, in fact. Her ribs no longer ache, and she's not at all exhausted, despite the lack of sleep.

Adan eyes the vials. “What's this, now?”

Margo hands him one of the unstoppered ones. “Would you check? I think I did it right, but want your expert opinion.”

The alchemist sniffs at the vial suspiciously, then he takes a small sip, rolling the liquid on his tongue. “Hmm. It's... a little stronger than I make them. But...” He takes another sip. She notices that the dark circles under his eyes pale a bit. Someone was up too late, Margo thinks to herself. Probably drinking hard, too.

“Not bad for a fledgling. We'll make an alchemist of you yet.”

Margo beams at the praise.

They spend most of the early morning working through her elfroot supply, but she saves some for a restoration potion, and then some more for the formula Solas gave her. She shows the elf's scribbled recipe to Master Adan. Bearded and Grumpy just shrugs with a noncommittal grumble. “No idea. Feel free to try, just don't blow up the place.”

Margo quizzes the alchemist about Master Taigan. It turns out that Adan began apprenticing with him when he was eleven, before securing admission into something called the College of Herbalists. He worked his way up from collection to processing to making formulas. He tells her silly stories about his early experiments with explosives, each one ending with a variant of “And then Master Taigan gave me a sound thrashing.”

From his stories, she gleans the names and geography of her new world. “Thedas” seems like the name of the continent — or something like it. It is subdivided into what Margo decides must be nation states. The speciation is confusing, but also bizarrely familiar. There are linguistic differences, presumably, but she can’t quite figure out if it’s languages or dialects. She’s still a bit shaky on the Qunari, but they apparently have something called “gaatlok” — for which Master Adan has a very serious hard-on. It sounds a whole lot like gunpowder.

By mid-morning they’re done processing the elfroot, and Adan hands her a handful of coppers in a small woven purse. Margo tucks her first earnings Thedas-side into her pocket. It seems like the perfect opportunity to go check on Evie, bring her the medicine, and haul the kid over to the apothecary to deliver Master Taigan’s notes. And then maybe track Varric down for lunch and buy him his damn beer, now that she actually can.

Evie’s house stands empty save for an overworked-looking elf on cleaning duty. Margo wanders around the village — a bit aimlessly — until her attention is drawn by the clanking of steel. A sparring ground flanked by a row of tents hosts a group of soldiers training in pairs or alone.

She spots Cassandra whacking at a wooden dummy like it stole her dinner. One part of the rink has attracted a group of gawkers, but the small crowd isn’t interested in the spectacle of the Seeker smiting the humanoid log. Instead, they are watching Evie and a female knight — or what Margo assumes to be a knight based on the heavy plate armor — circle each other. She picks up speed, propelled forward by a sudden bout of nervousness. Evie, armed with a sword and a shield she seems barely able to lift — let alone wield — is looking utterly miserable.

Not that Margo knows a thing about fighting — beyond minimal self-defense, and even that, dubious — but it doesn’t take a grandmaster in martial arts to realize that things aren’t going well. And the crowd, sorry bastards that they are, smell the blood and are circling.

It’s over in thirty seconds. The lady knight charges and disarms Evie in two blows. And then, without warning, slips on a patch of ice beneath the snow and lands on her ass with a metal clatter that puts Margo in mind of a collapsing tower of pots and pans. Evie jumps back, and cowers behind her shield, holding it up with both hands. There are jeers from the onlookers, and Margo “accidentally” bumps into a burly fellow whose hoots are particularly loud. He gives her an irritated look, which Margo counters with an innocent smile.

“Enough!” Commander Cullen, complete with the spectacular fur collar, emerges from between the tents at the same time as Seeker Pentaghast abandons her project of abusing the dummy. The both of them converge on the ring of spectators with matching expressions of focused disapproval.

The female knight rises to her feet, her face red with embarrassment. “With all due respect, Commander, she is not ready for the field.” She stands at attention, but the immobility looks forced.

“Your opinion is duly noted, Ser Lysette.” There is a note of warning in the military man’s tone.

The flush on Lysette’s cheeks spreads to the rest of her face. “She won’t last a day. I won’t use my men as fodder just to compensate for her... lack of training. We need more time, Knight-Captain. Ser.”

“Not in front of the soldiers,” Cullen grinds out, gives Evie an awkward nod, and leads his subordinate away by the elbow. Cassandra intercepts them, and they go off to discuss matters of state.

Margo collects the crestfallen Evie from the sparring rink, and takes the giant shield from her.

“Don’t let them see you cry,” she whispers. Evie furtively rubs her eyes with her sleeve, but at least she’s not bawling. Kid one, crowd zero.

As they begin to walk back towards the apothecary, Margo spots a familiar — and unwelcome — red-headed figure looming at the edge of the field like an oversized malevolent crow. The spymaster pins her with a calculating kind of stare — the kind that’s trying to decide if it wants to peck out your spleen or your liver first — and beckons with a hand. “A word?”

This cannot possibly lead anywhere good. Margo nods, acknowledging the summons, extracts the bundle of notes from her pack, and hands them to Evie.

“Could you do me a favor and take these to Master Adan? He’ll have some tonics for you to take home, too.”

“You’re not coming?” the kid asks, disappointment painted plainly on her face.

“Sure I am. I’ll be right up.” Either that, or she’ll be right down, straight to Comrade Nightingale’s dungeons.

The spymaster turns around and begins to walk up the hill, forcing Margo to catch up to her. “Walk with me, agent,” the redhead says in a suspiciously pleasant tone once Margo is level with her.

She doesn’t see many plausible alternatives to this proposition, so Margo complies. They make their way towards the temple.

“I could not help but notice that you have taken an interest in Lady Trevelyan. How very... thoughtful of you. How is your memory?”

“I’m working on it,” Margo offers cautiously.

“I am told you are making yourself very useful to Master Adan. It must be fascinating, working with all these potent substances.”

“Whatever helps me get my memories back faster.”

“I hear that this morning’s batch of healing potions is working well. Your doing?”

Margo nods, but remains silent, lest there are more questions that start with a variation of “I am told” or “I hear.”

“A useful skill, herbalism. Wherever did you pick it up. I do not recall it being in Charter’s recruiting dossier on you.”

So, there is a dossier on her? She wonders where it might be kept. Probably in a hell realm, protected by Cerberus and a thousand wrathful deities, if the Spymaster has her way. They stop some distance from the temple, but with a good view of its façade. In the morning light, the building is majestic. Above the roof, red banners flap in the morning breeze, stark smears of crimson against the white sky.

“Beautiful, is it not? There is the chantry, of course, but the site itself is much older. Haven has... a long history.”

At this point Margo’s pretty sure that the abrupt changes of subject — and tone — are a destabilizing tactic. Comrade Nightingale would certainly be pleased to know that it’s working as intended.

“You know, they say our young Lady Trevelyan is the Herald of Andraste herself. Sent to us in our time of need to rectify the wrongs of the world. Are you devout, agent?”

Margo considers how to answer. She has always been on the agnostic side of any kind of religious belief, with the general attitude that unless it comes over and whacks her on the head, then its existence remains dubious until proven otherwise. And then it came, and it whacked. Right into a world with magic, demons, and quite possibly other mythological shenanigans. Elves. Dwarves. Hellmouths. She wonders if there are dragons. And from dragons... well, it's not a far step to total suspended disbelief. But Comrade Nightingale probably doesn't want to hear her ecclesiastical musings. “I am... undecided,” Margo volunteers.

“Indeed you are!” the spymaster exclaims, with creepy cheer. “And how could you not be, since you have lost your memory.”

Of, fuck this shit very much, she can't walk on eggshells forever. She'll probably get killed either way, unless the spymaster manages to needle her to death before that. Margo takes a steadying breath. “Look, I know that you have no reason to trust me, but believe at least this. I am doing everything I can to find the information you need.”

Comrade Nightingale surveys her with an inscrutable look. “Perhaps. And in fact, I am inclined to give you the benefit of the doubt. Let us assume, for a moment, that you have, indeed, lost your memory. And let us also assume for a moment that your friendship with Lady Trevelyan is born of genuine sentiment. At the very least, traitor or not, you must understand her importance.”

Margo waits for the other shoe to drop.

“What do you make of her performance on the training grounds this morning?”

Ah. That must be the other shoe. Although she isn't sure what the local Gestapo's very own Herr – well, Ok, Frau - Göring is angling for. Either way, there is no point in denying the obvious — and aggravate the spymaster.

“I think that Lady Trevelyan is not very skilled at combat. But she is young, she will learn.”

“That, agent, is precisely the issue. She is not young for the skills she clearly does not possess. She should be accomplished with her chosen weapon by now, as all heirs to noble families are. And it remains a question why she is not. In fact, we know very little about her upbringing — her family is remarkably secretive on this subject — and I, for one, do not like secrets.” The spymaster smiles charmingly. “But more to the matter at hand, we do not have the luxury of time for her to train before we must make use of her. The mages and Templars are annihilating each other, there are Qunari on the coast, Orlais and Ferelden are jostling for power. And the place of the Divine stands vacant. I trust I do not have to mention the obvious problem.”

The woman gestures towards the sky behind them.

Margo tries to decide what is causing the spymaster's sudden loquaciousness. If Comrade Nightingale believes that this little exposé on Thedas geopolitics is going to lower her defenses, Margo's got a bridge to sell her.

“So you see our predicament. The Inquisition cannot shelter the Herald forever, and she needs to be in the field — minimally, closing rifts. We must ensure that people's faith in her status as the Herald of Andraste is buttressed in order to rally the population behind us. We are hemorrhaging troops, and we simply lack the manpower to build a self-sufficient operative unit while the Herald remains a liability. Which brings me to you, agent. And the problem of your lost patrol.”

Margo misses half of this, because she is still stuck at “The Inquisition.” Inquisitions, in her experience, are bad news. Aside from the fact that no one ever expects them, they have a tendency to get very zealous about the whole torture and burn approach to ideological dissenters.

Margo updates her label for the spymaster to Torquemada.

“I have good reason to think that there is an advantage to be gained on the Sword Coast, someone who might be useful for extending Lady Trevelyan’s life expectancy — despite her lack of military competence — and who might be persuaded to join our cause. If your memory loss is a farce, and you are an agent of the Qun — as I suspect — then it is possible that you will see this as playing into the hands of your masters, and will have no problem with my proposition. If it is not — whether because your memory troubles are the product of an accident or induced — then you will agree for sentimental reasons, to protect our young friend.”

The spymaster turns away from the chantry to survey the valley. Thin plumes of smoke are rising above the houses. From here, Margo can hear the metal clanking drifting up from the sparring grounds.

“Allow me to put it very simply. Despite Master Adan’s — and now your — alchemical efforts, we are desperate for healers. The apostate is helpful, but one mage gets us only so far. We must recruit aggressively, and there is a Chantry Mother and healer from the Hinterlands we need to bring into the fold. I doubt she will agree to take sides, but she might be swayed by the idea that Andraste herself has sent the embodiment of her benevolence. I can spare Cassandra and the mage for a week — and the dwarf, I assume, will tag along — but this will mean more losses among our wounded. It will also mean that we’ll incur more casualties from this mission, and by that point we should expect to be stretched very thin indeed. After that, we need to expand our ranks, and fast. Hence, I need your memories now. Not in three days. This is the only logistically sound approach. I am sorry.”

Oh, that’s the shoe. Well, fuck. “Can you give me until tomorrow morning?”

The Spymaster cuts her a dry glance. “So you might try to run? Do not waste your effort and my resources.”

Margo swallows. Her stomach feels like it’s trying to flee through her heels, but she forces her mouth to work through the icy terror. “No. I won’t run. If I have nothing for you by tomorrow morning, I will come willingly, and you can do as you please. But let me at least try to do this on my own terms.”

Torquemada crosses her arms. “I do not see how this delay would benefit the Inquisition.”

Margo pauses, formulating the sentence like her life depends on it. Which, of course, it does. “Think of it this way. If I am, in fact, a loyal agent to your cause and my story checks out, then you gain your information and retain an agent. If not, then you might gain your information — or might not — and you definitely lose an agent. You yourself are saying that you are already short on people.”

At this, the spymaster’s expression morphs into a cold smile, and for a second she reminds Margo of a grinning skull.

“You make a valid argument. These are acceptable terms. Tomorrow at first light, then.”

With this, Torquemada walks away, the snow creaking ominously under her boots. And Margo realizes belatedly that the spymaster maneuvered her to exactly where she wanted her.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is brought to you by Ponty Python's Flying Circus, because, as was already said, no one ever expects the Inquisition.

Next up: Alchemy, rituals, and as can be expected with mixing these things together, unintended consequences...

Thank you so much for reading, subscribing, kudos and comments. They warm my heart <3

In Memoriam (*)

Chapter Summary

In which Margo meditates on the merits of hot air balloons, mixes some potions, and in which a ritual goes poorly.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: a bit NSFW, read accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Margo walks back to the apothecary in a daze. The worst part of it all is that Torquemada, for all her callous attitude to the staff, is not wrong. The reasoning behind it is cynical — but like most cynical reasoning, it builds on a foundation of implacable practicality. This world Margo landed into is in deep crisis. You have the – ecological? cosmic? – clusterfuck that is the Hellmouth, and then you have the various powers, great and small, trying to exploit said clusterfuck to further some parochial and short sighted interest. Instead of all working together to try and not get annihilated by the fauna that gets vomited out of yonder portal, they’re treating it as a “business opportunity” — or a convenient distraction to get a one-up on someone else. Armored knights, demons, potential dragons, and pointy-eared mages aside, some things insist on being axiomatic, it would seem. You’d think landing in an entirely different dimension with new and interesting forms of sentient life could at least lend some alternative cultural and historical patterns, but no. Different world, same old shit. Margo scowls. How very *human*.

She reroutes her thoughts towards the problem at hand. If this Inquisition — terrible choice of name notwithstanding — is the only organization that has a remote shot at ameliorating some of the apocalyptic vibe, then Torquemada’s actions are understandable. This is all bigger than any one individual’s life — and from that angle, she supposes that everyone is disposable.

Everyone but Evie, as long as the green thing on her hand is capable of affecting these “rifts.” It does beg the question of where the holes in the fabric of reality lead to in the first place. Unpleasant things called “demons” allegedly fall out — do other things also fall *in* ? Is this a one-way street? What if someone took a hot air balloon — wouldn’t be too hard to make if magic includes the possibility of heating air on demand — and sent it up through the Great Green Gaping Hole?

She gives her mind a firm kick to reroute it back to the more immediate problems. This isn’t the time to play Bartolomeu de Gusmão — besides, if her own world’s historical record is any indication, Inquisitions do not like hot air balloons one little bit — or any other unidentified flying object.

And when it’s all said and done, there’s really not much room for hand-wringing. Margo has a solid enough sense of historicity to accept the whole “one small cog in the machine” theory of individual relevance. But then again, squeaky wheel gets the grease, so no sense in rolling over

either.

At the apothecary's entrance, she is greeted by a visibly happier Evie, who rattles off a string of exclamations about Master Adan, notes, and elfroot potions. Before she can process all that, the kid throws her arms around Margo's neck and gives her a loud peck on the cheek. And then the girl blushes bright red, and proceeds to apologize profusely.

"I mean... I don't mean... It's just that you gave me the notes to give Master Adan, and you didn't have to, and then you didn't let me stay all alone after I couldn't fight, and then you helped me home even though I was horribly drunk and embarrassing. Thank you for being such an amazing friend!"

Margo blinks once, and then grins. "You're welcome, kid. Next time you're drinking with Varric, watch out for that Jan guy. Or anyone else who seems to be bringing you lots of sweet drinks. And if you have to drink, stick to ale."

"Yup! I got it. Stick to ale, don't accept pretty drinks from strange men — or strange drinks from pretty men? Especially if they have fancy names. The drinks, I mean. Not the men."

"Right on. And even if the men have fancy names, that's not a good reason to accept drinks either."

Evie nods solemnly, digesting this nugget of timeless wisdom.

Adan armed the kid with a belt full of healing potions to dispense to the various makeshift infirmaries, and Evie departs on her delivery route with a renewed sense of purpose and a spring in her step.

Margo sighs. Good thing the biochemistry hasn't gotten sufficiently elaborate for Rufinol, but the locals are making do with what they have on hand. She makes a mental note to read Auntie's section on antidotes.

If she is alive by tomorrow afternoon, that'll be her new pet project.

Inside the apothecary, Master Adan, pleased with the day's development so far, promises Margo that he's going to teach her more complex preparations in a few days. "You'll be mixing Lyrium potions in no time, you mark my word." And whatever Lyrium is, Margo is intrigued enough by this prospect that the idea of dying in the next day-night cycle (however long they are here) really does not appeal.

She buckles down for the afternoon, and begins to try her hand at the restoration draughts. It's slow, finicky, and for someone who isn't her, probably boring work, but she finds herself oddly content. The elfroot requires pretty extreme reduction until it turns into viscous brown tar. Adan directs her to spread the paste on a polished wooden tray. They dry it, grind it, and leave it to extract further into an ethanol tincture heated over a water bath. The other ingredients are added later. It's not an uncommon technique, and she has seen the practice documented in several medical traditions back home, but the elfroot she gathered — whether because such is this particular species, or because of its unlikely growing conditions — isn't resinous enough.

She makes do with what she has, and on the third try, she has a restoration potion that looks the right color. The dark tawny liquid catches the light as she swirls it in a glass beacon. She hands it to Adan for testing.

He takes a cautious sip. "Hmm. Close. But not quite right either. Did you add the prophet's

laurel?”

“I did. What’s missing?”

He tastes the potion again. “Not astringent enough. It should have a binding finish, like... Hmmm. Ghoul’s beard after first frosts.”

She doesn’t know what a ghouls’ beard is, let alone what it might taste after frostbite, but she understands astringency. “Got it, like an unripe banana.”

Adan narrows his eyes. “Hmm. Been meaning to ask. Where are you from, lass? Bit of an accent. Up north? Seheron?”

Shit. Either they have actual bananas and Adan never had a green one, or “bananas” don’t mean what she thinks they mean. Either that, or elves don’t live where bananas do. Margo shrugs. Playing the airy blonde isn’t going to work with her new physique — despite the correct hair color. Her stolen body’s features are a little too much on the sharp and unaccommodating side of the equation. And double shit. She can’t actually *hear* any accent in her speech, but clearly Adan can. “I’ve traveled. Can you check over my formula? And technique?”

Adan grumbles, but obliges. He looks over her formulary as she prepares the base again. The alchemist frowns, flipping the pages back and forth. “Where are your annotations?” he asks.

Margo looks at him in puzzlement. “Should there be specific annotations?”

He gives her a look like she just fell out of the hellmouth while playing the accordion. Which, in a way, more or less describes the absurdity of the whole thing. “Who did you train with?”

All things being equal, better to tell the truth — or minimize the lies. “My grandmother dabbled,” she offers neutrally. “But I’m also largely self-taught.”

“Hedge witches...” Adan grumbles. “No wonder you’re struggling. You have natural talent, and I can see you have a good memory. And somehow, you have the technical training down better than any novice I’ve seen. But without a mentor’s explanations, you might as well be brewing tisanes.”

Margo vaguely realizes that she should be feeling chastised by all this, but instead she is practically bouncing up and down with excitement. It’s a lineage system! With a robust oral tradition! This is why the formularies are so bare bones. And in fact, it is probably why Auntie Ines is overrepresented – she’s guessing she was an iconoclast, trying to systematize the whole knowledge into a single corpus of work. But she still must have kept local variations out of the compendium, maybe because she was trying to distill a kind of average formula out of many local variants. Or maybe simply out of respect for guild secrets. Yes. Then the compendium would be useful for teaching, but one would still need a mentor to offer commentaries and explanations. To hone the formulas. Knowledge systematized, oral tradition preserved – it’s a win-win. Atta Auntie.

She notices Adan is staring at her in befuddlement. “You know you’re a strange lass, right?”

“I’ve been called worse things. So. What am I missing?”

It turns out that the mixture requires grated deep mushroom (also known as totally different species of fungus that all happen to grow underground, but otherwise don’t have much in common), added to the concoction right before it boils. Soon enough, Margo has a sample that passes Adan’s approval, and she is ready to tackle Solas’s formula.

Except, of course, by this point she has barely any elfroot left, and it’s getting too late to go gather

more and still have time to brew. The only option left is to follow the formula exactly as it is noted, and hope for the best.

In an hour, she is done. Margo stretches her back, the muscles stiff from leaning over the workstation for too long. She lets the potion cool a little bit before taking a small sip of it to check the taste. The spice is there — a mild burn, mostly felt in the throat rather than on the tongue. But the sweetness is faint. Nowhere near cloying.

Dumping a bunch of molasses in there is unlikely to solve the pharmacological divergence, so Margo corks the bottle, finds a cloth to wrap around it so that the draught doesn't cool too fast in the cold, and she carefully deposits it into her bag.

When she leaves the apothecary, the sky is dark and overcast. She considers swinging by the tavern, but decides against it, since mixing alcohol with pharmaceuticals is a recipe for drug-interaction disaster. She can't quite recall the last time she ate, but considering how little draught she ended up producing, drinking it on an empty stomach might be the wiser course of action anyway.

Perhaps she should go check on Evie, and make sure she didn't get into any new and interesting trouble. Or she could try to see if Master Harritt might make her a little portable rake for digging plants out of the permafrost. Or she could go watch Seeker Pentaghast take out her aggression on a log in a hat.

She's stalling. Because now that the jig is up, she is terrified out of her wits. For all her tough talk about the innocence of rituals, Margo has few doubts that in a world where magic is so immediate, there is nothing benign about ritualistic behavior.

She comes to a halt in the middle of the courtyard, suddenly unsure. This is a terrible idea. What was she thinking? She doesn't know this Solas bloke — sure, he helped her in the past, but it doesn't solve the mystery of *why* he did it. Varric said as much — the elf isn't known to fuss over the common soldiers, so why did he bother with her?

And then it hits her. Of course. Torquemada. It's the only logical explanation. This body's previous occupant had been sent on a mission to the Sword Coast (whatever that is, it doesn't sound inviting) — and then came back — minus a patrol — and, instead of reporting to the spymaster right away, went off and died on some other mission. Didn't Solas say something to the effect of being pleasantly surprised at her unexpected recovery? And she did wake up in a separate log cabin, instead of an infirmary with all the other wounded, which suggests that they had kept her isolated for whatever reason.

Margo forces herself to take a step, then another. She was allowed to wander around with no oversight. Which means that Solas must have made her "amnesia" into a social fact, which is probably why she isn't being introduced to interesting Inquisitorial devices of the sharp and pointy variety. At least, not yet.

Which, in turn, brings her right back to the original question. Why did he help?

All right. Only one way to solve that mystery. Salt circles. Candles. Incense. Silly wiccans. Just like home. What could possibly go wrong? She can do this. Not that there is much of an alternative.

Margo knocks on Solas's door, and then, for a second or two, she hopes he won't answer. At least, she assumes it's his door. She has seen him standing outside this house, down the street from her apothecary — and why would he be loitering about if this weren't where he was staying?

The door swings open, and, indeed, it's the elf himself.

For a split second, before he puts on his neutral face, surprise registers on his features. "Ah. You have come. Please." He steps aside, gesturing for her to enter.

Margo knocks the snow off her boots at the threshold, trying to avoid dragging the mush into his house. She looks around. The space is no frills, going on ascetic. The only piece of decoration is a truly heinous portrait on one of the walls. By the looks of the depicted gentleman, perhaps a previous Inquisitor? The furniture is simple. A bed, a dresser, a few chairs. Books and notes are scattered about.

"You travel light, don't you?" Margo jokes, trying to decide where she should sit. Or stand. Or... whatever. In the absence of a conveniently drawn goat-headed pentagram with a helpful "*insert sacrificial maiden here, facing this way,*" she feels a little lost. Not that she's a maiden. Or that this is meant to be a sacrifice. Right?

"Please, sit." Solas paces towards one of the chairs, then he seems to change his mind, and pulls up the other. He hesitates, somehow torn between chair one and chair two. If there are subtle differences between the two seating options, Margo hasn't noticed them.

Is he nervous? She is not sure if that should make her feel better, or worse.

Well, no time like the present. "How does it work?"

The elf clears his throat. "It is quite simple — at least, in theory." The smile is probably meant to be reassuring, but it seems a little forced. "When a spirit crosses into the physical world, it risks corruption. On occasion, it is possible to draw upon the Fade to help it recollect its nature before it passes into nonexistence." He clasps his hands behind his back, and starts pacing. "Spirits reflect the memories emplaced in their environment. And thus, before a spirit ceases to exist, it is possible to feed magic into the patterns that gave it form to offer it one final apprehension of itself."

Margo nods slowly. Not that she's exactly following all this — the biggest stumbling block being "Fade," and spirits as some kind of autonomous entity. Then again, if there are demons, then it seems logical to assume that there might be spirits as well. "And how would this apply to working with a body?"

Solas comes to a stop. "We presume the same thing. The body retains some memories that are, for whatever reason, inaccessible to your spirit. The spell should activate and maintain the body's memory for long enough to recover the necessary information."

Margo examines the elf. He looks ... not excited, exactly, but definitely eager — like he's itching to try this, and verify if it works quite as neatly in practice as it does in theory. She suppresses a nascent frown. So that's the motivation. Scientific curiosity combined with a conveniently available experimental organism. If so, then he's not taking a big variable into consideration, and it seems unethical — not to mention really fucking stupid — not to warn him.

"Solas? There is something about me that you should probably know."

"Oh?" He leans against one of the bookshelves, in a relaxed pose that also manages to be a little cheeky. "You mean something beyond what I have already seen?"

Is the egghead flirting with her? "Cute. And yes." He can flirt all he wants now, it's not going to be all daisies and sunshine when he realizes that she's a body snatcher.

"Very well. So it is not about your body. Or at least not about its physical aesthetics, since I am

already somewhat familiar with that aspect. Do you wish to tell me now, or shall I see for myself?"

Margo chuckles grimly. Yes, definitely flirting. But also, probably nervous. Maybe this is how he handles that. Except, of course, the blasted warm and fuzzies make a roaring comeback. She reminds herself that it isn't even *her* body.

Which brings her to his original question. "Both. I am going to offer you the best explanation I can, and then I want you to check for yourself, because in my experience empirical understanding is worth a thousand words. And the reason I want you to do that is because I think it will have to change the way you approach your spell."

Solas nods, stops propping up the bookcase, and comes to sit on the chair in front of her, one leg over the other, chin on his fist. Margo decides he just needs a pair of black rim glasses to complete the ensemble. He's already rocking the turtleneck. Your iconic Leftist intellectual. Vive la Révolution. Her eyes are drawn to an odd pendant hanging from a set of leather cords around his neck. It looks like some kind of... mandible? A fox, maybe — judging by the size. The bone is almost black, which strikes Margo as odd — the surface is too evenly dark to look natural, unless creatures in this realm use something other than calcium for bone-building.

Solas catches her gaze on the pendant, but offers no explanations, and Margo decides that they're probably not well-acquainted enough for her to quiz him about his choices of jewelry. Besides, there are more pressing issues. What does she say? Easy, right? She had a near death experience, and got translocated into a different body. Except that "translocated" is a massive euphemism. I come in peace, please don't take me to your leader. "I'm not exactly who I seem to be," she finally manages, and yes, it sounds pretty damn weak.

"Ah." He doesn't seem surprised. Or not as surprised as he should be. "You are one of Leliana's agents. I suspect this comes as a hazard of your profession."

She should probably elaborate. Except, Margo chickens out. "Just look for yourself."

The elf hesitates, his gaze focused on some invisible internal horizon. Finally, he seems to make a decision. "Then we will proceed as intended. As with sleep, your body will go into a type of paralysis. I suggest you lie down." He gestures to the bed. "And before we begin, you must drink the draught."

Beats the goat-headed pentagram. Margo takes off her jacket, and hangs it on the back of her chair. She fishes through her knapsack for the vial. The cork is wedged too tightly, sucked in by the change in temperature, and it takes her a few tries to unstopper the bottle.

"Well. To the benefit of all beings." The Buddhist blessing seems appropriate — and conveniently encompassing.

She downs the potion in a few quick gulps. It goes down smoothly, and sure enough, there is a new sweetness mixed in with the spice — a finish that wasn't there before. Sweet, but not cloying. She should have waited for the stuff to extract for longer.

Margo lies down on the bed, which might as well be a plank for all the cushioning it lends. How does he sleep on that thing? Solas pulls up his chair and leans over her, his hands passing over her body without touching it. And at this point, she has such a vivid recollection of the one time she went for an energy healing sessions — gauded into it by her brother, at the time in one of his "spiritual" phases — that she has to suppress a grin.

She shoots a quick glance at the elf. He looks so earnestly focused, that Margo can't help the quip.

“This is where you tell me that my chakras have obstructions, isn’t it?”

A look of puzzlement comes over his features. “I beg your pardon?”

At first, it’s just a quiet sort of harrumph. But because Solas is now sporting the unmistakable look of peeved annoyance, Margo burst into giggles. The more she tries to suppress them, the more insistent the giggles become, and soon enough she’s curled up in a fetal position, tears streaming down her cheeks as she tries to stuff the hysterical laughter back down.

“You are not taking this seriously enough.” And because she expects more peevish disapproval, Margo is jolted out of her hysterical sniggering by the soft sadness in his voice.

She meets the elf’s eyes, and thinks to herself that it would be easy — and a terrible idea — to get lost in their shifting colors. “I’m sorry. Coping strategy.”

He nods. And then there’s a distinct change in the texture of his non-touch, and Margo feels a jolt, hot and cold at once, that courses from his hands and into her body. She forces herself to keep still, no longer in the mood for hilarity.

Solas draws back with a hiss.

Margo lifts up on one elbow to get a better look at his expression, and what she sees there unnerves her. There’s... she’s not sure what it is. Surprise. Fear, maybe. And a heartbroken kind of recognition that she can’t even begin to identify.

“What are you?”

Margo reaches over, and grabs his hand, because somehow this seems like the most logical thing to do at the moment. His skin is cool, his fingers long and delicate like a musician’s. He tenses at the touch, so she quickly retracts her palm. “I’m... from elsewhere.”

He bolts to his feet, takes a few steps, and then he turns around. “Yes, I can see that your essence is not of this body. But you are not...” He trails off.

And that, of course, is the heart of it. “I think you might be able to get the whole story. If you’re willing to keep going.”

He hesitates for a few moments, but, at length, he paces back to his chair and lowers himself into it. Margo reclines back on the bed. Her earlier hilarity has dissipated, leaving in its wake a sense of unfocused dread. She is not sure which is more terrifying — that the elf would decide to proceed, or that he might storm out and report her to Torquemada. Or fry her with a lightning bolt, and be done with it.

One way or another, the ball is in his court. That her life probably depends on it doesn’t mean she can force him. Margo sneaks a glance. Solas is contemplating her with such intense puzzlement it borders on painful, but he quickly resets the expression back to neutral when he catches her gaze. He turns away, takes off the odd mandible ornament, and sets it down on the table. When he turns to her again, his face is unreadable, but the words, when they come, sound oddly resigned. “Very well. Let us begin.”

Margo nods once.

His hands are back, hovering over her. The hot-cold sensation that emanates from them is much stronger this time, on the edge of uncomfortable. Then Solas frowns, shakes his head, and lowers his hands down, almost framing her face. The unsettling temperature disturbance subsides. Margo

feels his fingertips glide over her forehead. She tenses, caught in the contradiction of fight or flight. His touch is gentle but clinical, so she forces her body to settle down.

Still, when he speaks, Margo practically jumps out of her skin. “This body’s memory is not your own. If I allow it to manifest, it is possible that your spirit will be forced to... accommodate it. The draught should allow you to be a spectator, keeping you — and I — at a safe distance. Are you certain that this is what you wish?”

Margo nods, because she doesn’t have the voice to say the obvious. She’s come this far. There’s no turning back now — and, besides, there is no time to find a safer alternative.

Another jolt of magic, a brief sense of vertigo, and then she sees a little girl — a human one, with dark hair and olive skin, just like her Baba’s — skipping rope in a weedy yard. Chickens run underfoot.

She watches the girl from about ten feet away. There is a presence next to her. She doesn’t need to look to know it’s Solas, Virgil to her Dante.

“You?” The question comes from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Before Margo can figure out how to articulate an answer, the image hitches and morphs, like a visual glitch or a dream mutating into another. An elven girl with flaxen hair plays an unfamiliar game on the cobblestones of a medieval city. The girl is younger — or perhaps just small. Margo catches a whiff of frying oils, raw sewage, and recent rain.

The dark-haired girl skipping rope is gone, the memory scattered.

What comes next rushes along in a flurry of images. The elven girl is outside, wandering the woods. It’s dark, and she is afraid, but she is more terrified by what she has left behind — there, in the tenseness of her shoulders and the bruises on her face — than by what lies ahead. A thin, shadowed figure with a bow strapped to her back comes to meet her underneath the tree cover. The woman’s face floats into view — her features are utterly alien, but not so dissimilar from those of the little blond girl. The woman’s skin is covered in elaborate tattoos in the shape of a stylized tree.

The memory fades. On the other side of the thin membrane between wakefulness and dreaming, Margo can feel Solas’s hands trailing down from her head to her neck, and then resting on her shoulders.

“There is little here,” she thinks she hears him say, but before she can respond, another flood of images takes over. She is still apart from them, a voyeur peeking in. Solas’s presence doubles — there, in a faraway room next to an unfamiliar bed, and here, in the maze of memories not of her making.

She — and this time, it is Margo once again, at maybe thirteen or fourteen — is painting the ornate window trim of a wooden house, alongside another figure, tall and gaunt like a scarecrow. The presence isn’t menacing — quite the opposite. She could recognize its ghost anywhere. Baba. Margo’s muscles ache with the strain of repeated motion, but the trim is turning azure, and baba chuckles quietly next to her. “*Szép munka*, my heart, now these silly neighbors can talk. A real gingerbread house for the village witch, hmm?”

And then Baba is gone, and so is the memory, eaten by the magic spell, and traded for another’s past. An elven girl — maybe thirteen or fourteen — is learning dagger work. She is fast — strike, parry, strike, twirl. She dances with another elven man — her trainer, perhaps — and there, in the background, an old elven woman with olive skin, dark hair that glints with silver threads, and slate

grey eyes nods approvingly. “*On*, whenan, you will be a fine warrior in your time.”

As they move over her body, Solas’s hands bring more memories of her host — and reduce her own to nothing but ash on the wind — and Margo wants to cry at their loss, but it seems like it is the only possible price to pay for the knowledge of this other being, gone now, safe for its fragments. She feels the elf’s hands glide over her ribs, and she learns of the elven girl’s rejection of the Vallaslin — a badge of honor to wear with pride, offered and refused. She walks away, her heart pounding with anger and heartbreak, into the service of a woman called Charter. There is a reason behind it, but from her voyeuristic vantage point one step outside of the memory, Margo can see that the reason is not the cause. The explanation is the lie the girl tells herself — about a boy who is meant for the fierce sister, but prefers the gentler one. The boy’s choice wounds, but also brings relief — the elven girl doesn’t quite fit into the order of things, and now she no longer needs to.

Margo loses her memory of her first kiss to it. Ivan, at fifteen, climbing over the fence to pilfer tea roses from the neighbor’s yard for her. There, and then gone.

She comes out of the magic-induced reverie with a start, and finds the elf staring at her.

Margo sits up. The hut is dark, safe for one candle burning at her bedside. She can’t recall Solas lighting it.

“This...” He shakes his head, an expression that can only be qualified as tortured flashing across his face. “Do not ask this of me.”

She stares at him in puzzlement. Is the process taking too much of his magic? He looks slumped over — and a little green — and Margo wonders whether they should take a break, except that nothing so far has produced anything useful. And if they stop now, it means the memories of herself she is losing would have been for nothing.

“Why?” That seems like a reasonable question.

“Because this process is altering your very essence.” Solas gestures abruptly, gets up, and starts pacing again. It seems that his way of dealing with emotional strain is extraneous movement. It is a different kind of anger than she’s seen on him before. Not the quickly smothered flare of frustration, this is something deeper and more primordial to who he is. “I should never have offered this.”

So it’s not a technical difficulty, but an ethical quandary, then. Margo tries to decide how to respond. From what she can gather, the elf doesn’t need intellectual coddling. She thinks he can take an honest answer. And if not, then better find out earlier rather than later. She sits up on the bed and shrugs. “Everything has a price. I’m choosing to pay it willingly.”

Solas stops pacing. “You cannot know what you are asking.”

Margo eyes him, smothering a sudden jolt of irritation. “I’d very much prefer it if you didn’t presume that I am incapable of deciding how to balance the scales.”

That gets at him. He stalks over and plants himself over her, looming, the anger still boiling hot, right beneath the still surface. “Very well, then. What shall we do next? Shall we start back up with your feet?”

Margo nods before reclining back. “Might as well.”

“I must work fast. The potion is waning. Once it is gone, the effects it was suppressing will be

amplified.”

Ah. Withdrawal. Wonderful.

He doesn’t give her a chance to adjust. He puts his hands on her ankles, and the magic surges forward, practically knocking her into the dream state. His presence is still there at her side, but it feels faint. Barely a whisper.

There are more images as his hands travel up. Learning stealth. More dagger work. Figuring out how to read body language to get the most information she can glean. Bloody, stabby things in the dark of night. She loses more things to this. Her last memory of her parents — a breakfast, Jake still a toddler — before the car bomb took them. The graduation ceremony when she is handed her PhD diploma, her old supervisor shaking her hand, jokingly formal. “Not bad, for a Gipsy urchin.” She hates the quip, but she still loves the old man — he took a chance on her. He hands her his seminal book on the history of the Rroma. The copyright page bears a lengthy autograph, most of it encouraging.

And still, this isn’t enough, but Solas’s presence alongside her is barely there now, a ghost of a ghost. And then, suddenly, it fades to nothing.

Margo falls deep into the memories, no longer a spectator, but a participant.

The flow of Solas’s magic stops abruptly, and Margo opens her eyes — though she doesn’t remember closing them — and looks at him. “There must be more. I still have nothing on what the spymaster wants.”

His expression hardens. “And if there is nothing left? This body’s former occupant is all but gone, and what remains are traces. Haphazard.”

She feels her jaw clench. “Then we get whatever we can.”

“And you lose more of yourself?”

“You’re seeing what’s being erased, yes?”

He nods curtly.

“Then it’s not all lost. You’ll tell me later what I forgot.”

The elf exhales through his teeth, a sharp, sibilant sound. And while Margo is tempted to start intellectualizing this, she doesn’t, because then she’ll put a stop to the whole thing, and this entire fucking exercise will have been moot.

“I cannot keep us at bay from the memories anymore. This will only get more difficult.” His tone is bone-dry.

She looks at him again, and she knows he’s hoping she would tell him to stop, except that he doesn’t exactly want to. Not quite. Because, by now, Lady Curiosity’s got him. Besides, judging by the rigid yet resigned body language, the elf has a fatalistic streak.

“Alright. Let’s get this show on the road and be done with it. What’s left? Hip area?”

He nods.

“Do it.”

His hands settle over her hip bones. Margo thinks she's prepared, except this time, there is no more separation. The potion has lost its potency, and the withdrawal sucks her under.

And of course, they find what they were looking for, but later, and many times after that, she will wonder at what price.

It starts innocently enough.

She — Margo Duvalle (her father's last name, not the names of the matriline that make up the root system of her sense of self) — is walking through a field of flowers. It's summer. She wears a short cotton dress, and the tall grass tickles her legs. Baba's shaggy shepherd dog runs ahead, down the meadow that leads up to the ancient river. A butterfly alights on the large blue globe of a thistle flower.

Gone.

She — Maile — is walking through tall grass, its blades heavy with water. She climbs a steep hill, careful not to lose her footing on the muddy trail. The top of the hill is desolate — nothing but rain, and pines, and an old abandoned shack, its wooden planks grey and weatherworn. She finds herself pacing, waiting, impatient. When the footsteps come, she whirls around, and he is there, the one waited for — a man in robes that look like armor. He is tanned and smooth like a river pebble. His gait is predatory and quick, and he glides up to her, feline grace stalking a prey. She feels heat blossom in her lower belly, and before long, they are unfastening each other's garments, not nearly quickly enough.

Margo's hips buckle. She arches her back, helpless to stop the reaction. She tries to control her body, but it's no use. She is locked in its response, like in the horror of sleep paralysis, but perversely motile. And a second later, the magic reverbs through the elf. She sees his pupils dilate. A sigh — soft as a feather — escapes his lips, before he has a chance to press them together into a grim line. And then the memory rolls over them like the ocean tide it is, her body's stored recollections no longer buffeted by the alchemical potency of her draught. Her lover presses her against the wall, and she wraps her thighs around his hips. He lifts her up, hands on her ass, and a second later they are joined. She grabs an overhead beam to give herself more leverage and echoes his movements, an urgent heat spreading through her. They match each other, the dance familiar, and longed for.

Wake-side, she can feel Solas's hands tighten on her hips, and she's pretty sure if she looked — if she could look — his knuckles would be white with strain. His entire body is locked into a self-negating paradox, equal and opposite impulses — to keep her at bay, and to pull her closer, the memory like an infection of the mind.

"I cannot stop this," he chokes out, and she understands it, understands it at the absolutely basic level of the spell's mechanism. To maintain a dwindling spirit, one must maintain the entire armature that sustains it through the whole of what remains of it. There is no fast-forward button. They will have to ride out the pre-recorded reel to its end.

And so, as Maile's pleasure is rising at her lover's quickening thrusts, Margo also feels Solas's magic animate not just this nameless ghost that's fucking her, but everything around them — the rickety wall at her back, the cool rain drops on her face, the damp sea air on her bare skin, the wind in the rustling pines, and, in the distance, the roar of an alien ocean.

Her host's body climaxes, but of course, so does she, because they are the same by now. She's jolted out of the dreamscape with a harsh inarticulate cry, and a second later, the magic reverbs back to its source. Solas's thumbs caress her hips, a fraction of a movement that still feels

momentous somehow, the subtle echo of him losing an invisible battle against himself, and then his entire body shudders. He makes a small noise at the back of his throat, and grinds his teeth, the muscles of his jaw visible in stark relief in the slanted light of the candle. He sways. Margo expects him to move his hands away, but he he does not.

Tears stream from the corners of her eyes, down her temples, and into her hair. For a few seconds, she is able to hold on to it — to the thing she lost to the remains of the other. Her daughter. Two years, five months, six days, and as the doctor said, too short a time, and they did everything they could. Too short a time, and now a birthday in the middle — the one before the diagnosis — gone, overwritten. It fades, safe for the memory of forgetting itself.

“There’s more.” She can barely force out the whisper.

After what feels like an eternity, Solas nods, eyes averted, and she wonders whether he’ll ever have the chutzpah to look at her again square in the face.

Or whether she will.

He moves his hands to her abdomen, the place where the recent scar is.

From there, it’s easy, comparatively speaking. And the only thing she loses to it is her 30th birthday party, which, to be perfectly honest, she can live without, because it’s patchy to begin with — too many cocktails, and maybe dancing on the bar table at one point.

She — Maile — walks up to a camp. There are bodies everywhere. Dead and still warm, while she was otherwise occupied. The patrol. She finds something in the mud — an amulet. The feeling that comes at the moment of recognition isn’t dread — it’s a step beyond it. The medallion is just like the one her lover wore, though his body is not among the corpses. A carefully premeditated betrayal she feels down to the marrow of her bones.

And then, the blasted Breach, cosmic horror that it is. And she’s fighting in a pure, desperate rage that only someone who wants to die would bring into battle. Before long, she gets her wish. A fiery form – and the word that comes to Margo’s mind is *Ifrit* – gets into her head, her very soul.

And then Solas pulls her out of the dream state, just as the demon eviscerates her.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by a public service announcement: don't engage in unprotected magical activity. Make sure that your magic protection has passed all regulations regarding quality and safety. Should your magic protection fail mid-ritual, suspend all magical activities until you are able to safely engage again.

Also, Bartolomeu de Gusmao, a 18th century Jesuit priest who worked on developing airships, and who had some problems with the Inquisition too.

Next up: Fallout

Solamen miseris

Chapter Summary

In which Solas and Margo discuss unintended consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When it is over, Margo remains on the bed in a thoughtless torpor, more exhausted than she can remember ever being. The silence stretches, thick and viscous. She struggles with the enormity of the misbegotten results of their disastrous experiment, and it feels like her mind would sooner snap than accommodate the contours of what they wrought. Before she loses herself to the impossibility of dealing with the sordid mess, Margo narrows her focus to the pinprick of a present immediate.

She has done this before. Dealt with the unimaginable. She can do it again. One foot in front of the other. One step at a time. Just keep walking. Platitudes to the rescue.

She doesn't dare to look at the elf, though, for fear of what she might find in his expression.

There's a whitish glow, and her peripheral vision catches a magical ripple moving across his frame, leaving in its wake the crisp bite of ozone. She steals a proper glance then. Solas, still seated on the chair, wordlessly gestures at her — barely a twitch of his fingers, like brushing off lint from one's clothes. She surmises he's offering her the same service without asking her directly whether she would like to... Well. Clean off, she supposes. Margo nods. As good a place to start with the whole one foot in front of the other strategy as any. A quick wave of magic passes over her, barely perceptible. But she feels refreshed, and her clothes are suddenly clean and smell of warm grass and thunderstorms. On-demand dry-cleaning. Nifty.

Since the metaphorical elephant in the room is just going to keep milling about awkwardly and trampling the precious china, the least they can do is acknowledge it.

She sits up and maneuvers herself to face him. She feels hungover.

Solas remains still as a statue, elbows on knees, hands clasped together in a tight grip, his gaze at the floor. She can't quite make out his expression at this angle, but there is vertical groove between his eyebrows.

"Ok." Margo draws a breath. Where to start? "This... This did not go as planned."

He says nothing. Nor does he look at her, and his rigid posture and stony expression catch Margo's irascible edge. Sure, she fucked up on the potion. But he wasn't exactly reluctant to play Dr. Frankenstein either, so the least he could do is deal with the shambling results. "Look." Margo keeps the irritation firmly under lock and key, and tries for conciliatory, but only manages politely neutral. Good enough for now. "There is nothing to be done for it now, so I'd rather not wallow in all the million shades of fucked-up. Are you all right?"

He looks up then, and Margo shrinks back. Under the tense surface of the elf's now familiar features, she gets a glimpse of something else — a shadow passing in the grey fog of his eyes,

there, then out of sight. And for some reason, she is viscerally reminded of the feeling of him, that sense of overwhelming presence as he animated the memories of Maile's last rendezvous. It puts her in mind of the living landscapes of her world's shamanic religions, the sense of intent in the very fabric of what would later become mere "natural phenomena." The certain knowledge of a willful consciousness, as intimate as it is unfathomable, whose desires, beyond ken, drown you in their indifferent currents.

Another wrathful deity. Another cosmological horror.

And then, he is, once again, just Solas.

When he finally speaks, his voice is quiet and fierce. "Did you find what you sought, da'elgar?" Her brain struggles to process the alien word. At length, a meaning surfaces slowly, a linguistic inheritance left over from what remained of Maile. It is almost forgotten, like a mother tongue one spoke as a child, but lost from disuse. *Little spirit*. "Are the scales balanced to your satisfaction now?"

"You are angry," Margo observes. Because, when in doubt, point out the obvious. That always goes over well.

"And you are not? Do you not feel revolted at what we did? This... violation?" He hacks the last word out, like it can't leave his mouth fast enough.

Uh-oh. Is he talking about the sexual part of their walk down memory lane? Sure, it's messy, to say the least, but "violation?" Her fingertips go numb and her stomach tries to drop into her heels. Oh dear Unspecified and Thoroughly Ill-tempered Deity, but she knows nothing about this guy. Perhaps it was deeply awful for him — who knows what experiences he is bringing to the table. And if the whole banging by proxy weren't weird enough on its own terms, what if the encounter itself was entirely outside of the sorts of experiences he would consider desirable, or even fathomable? People have pretty strong preferences when it comes to their choice of sexual partners.

Then, suddenly, it hits her, and Margo stares at him in the mute horror of understanding. Because, for her, the whole experience can still retain the natural distance that her culture's habits of mind assign to dream-states. Uncanny, but immaterial. A fugue from the actual. The comfort of "well, that was a fucked-up dream," however real it felt at the time. Even if she no longer buys this, deep down, she can still lie to herself for just a little while longer...

But for him, this has never been an option. For him, what is, is.

Margo feels her cheeks heat up. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked you to do this, it was selfish and incredibly shortsighted of me. I didn't realize it'd go that way. Or that the only useful part of what remained of my predecessor would be this." She is babbling. Not good. "To be clear, I don't want you to think that I feel ...uh... violated, if this is part of your concern. I mean, Maile certainly had questionable taste in men... And the... technical aspects of it were weird, and not how I'd go about it under normal circumstances... But..." Still babbling. Oh, she is just making a mess of this. "I am so sorry that this got forced on you. I would have made a stronger draught if I had the time, or the skill, but..." She runs out of words.

Solas frowns, perplexed, and then understanding dawns. "Ah." His ears turn pink. "No, not that. That is not ... what I meant." He swallows, and then his face softens, and, in the next instant, turns abashed. "That particular aspect of it was not... It was not horrible. Not how I would prefer to go about it either, as you so tactfully put it, but..." He clears his throat again, and then colors quite a bit more, realizes this, and looks painfully flustered for a few seconds. And, at first, Margo is just immensely relieved, the weight of a deep dread she doesn't know how to articulate suddenly lifted.

Until, that is, she realizes belatedly that for him it wasn't quite the same "by proxy" as for her. Was it voyeuristic? Was it like watching a low-budget porno with a perfunctory gesture at a fantasy plot, or did he have to "inhabit" Maile's lover? On a better day, this might make for an intellectually fascinating problem. Clearly, this is not a better day. Margo groans, and squeezes her eyes shut. She is getting butterflies in her stomach. Of all the possible responses, it just had to be the blasted butterflies. Insufferable insects. Pests, the lot of them. A pox on all the houses. She squeezes her eyes tighter. Oh, no... no no no. She tries to say something, but all she manages is "Hrmm."

"Let us... perhaps reserve this particular discussion for another day." Margo cracks open one eye and ventures a look at the elf. He takes a breath, and exhales softly. "I meant the alteration to your spirit. The... melding. Do you not feel its wrongness?"

She sighs. She doesn't have the lexis for this shit. Fade. Spirits. Hellmouth. Magic. Burn the witches, hail the Inquisition, no one ever expects it.

Margo puts a firm stop to the mental drivel. "Look." She hesitates, smothering the impulse to lay her hand on his knee — or pat his shoulder. "There is this law of physics in my world — and I would guess that it works by and large the same way here, because universal laws like to do that. It's called conservation of energy. Put simply, when something accrues somewhere, it has to be taken from somewhere else. Like what you said about spirits. They have to sort of accumulate in the Fade, right? Like a sort of... ecological habit? So same rules apply. Add a little here, take a little from elsewhere."

By the time Margo is done with the rousing speech on Newtonian thermodynamics, Solas is staring at her with eerie concentration. Neither of them looks away, and then the moment stretches past socially appropriate, and they find themselves in the uncanny valley of overlong eye contact. She tries to drop her gaze, but she's stuck. The elf jerks his head — as if to shake off the torpor — and the odd bubble bursts. He straightens. His face is placid again, safe for the telltale tightness to his jaw.

"This is an apt metaphor. And I understand your argument." He swallows again, vacillating on the edge of a question. If she didn't know any better, and judging purely by the body language, she'd think he's working up the courage to ask her out — which strikes her as hilarious, in an absurdist sort of way, and Margo bites the inside of her cheek to suppress the impending hysterics. "I would welcome the chance to discuss your world with you at length, as it promises to be a fascinating subject. At some later time."

Ah. Wait. *Is* he asking her out?

He pauses, then forges on. "But it does not change the fact that our clumsy fumbling altered your very essence. My anger was misdirected. It was I who was selfish. I was curious about the possibilities of the spell. And now, because..." He is clearly looking for words, and when he finds them, they come out with a generous helping of self-loathing. "Because of my failure to guide you towards a wiser course of action, even when the responsibility to know better was mine, you are no longer simply Margo — that is your name, yes? You are also this other. Maile, was it?" He shakes his head once and looks down at his hands again.

Ah. So he doesn't like Maile very much at all. And that's at least part of his discomfort. And the other part of it is about self-control, but she is too tired and too raw to really give it the analysis it deserves.

Margo exhales, a profound sadness rolling over her like a dark tide. "If we count essence by quantity, then I'm still me, I think. The dose of Maile is, relatively speaking, rather small. And it

seems fitting that something of what remained of her should still be... recorded.”

Solas doesn’t respond right away. “Not at this cost,” he finally offers, his voice quiet.

“Hold on.” Margo tries to set her tone to neutral, or, failing that, to keep the tremor out. “You have my memories now, right? Maybe you can simply tell me about them. Or show me at some point? Could this be done? Sure, it won’t feel like my own lived experience, but I have enough context to incorporate them into the broader story. And over time, these things tend to get all mixed in anyway. Tricky thing, memory.” She smiles, hoping it’ll help lift the mood. “See, aren’t hermeneutics fun?”

This surprises an incredulous chuckle out of him, and his expression becomes tentatively less bleak. “An interesting thought. I believe this may be possible, to a degree. You would have to learn to meet me in the Fade — what you call dreams. There, it would be easier to show you. Do you have some degree of control over your dreaming?”

Margo frowns. Is he asking her if she has lucid dreams? “Sometimes.” That sounds a bit too optimistic. “Not well,” she amends after a pause. “In my world, there are religious traditions with techniques to teach you that, but they are rudimentary compared to what I suspect you have here. I used to try to dabble when I was younger, but then it sort of fell by the wayside...”

He perks up. “Good. Rudimentary is still a step forward, and we will build on whatever base you might have. You should begin to practice as soon as possible. Even if it will not repair what we did, with time you could learn to arrange the memories of this other spirit to fit with yours better. And recuperate some of what you lost.”

“Can you really move through your dreams in the same way as when you’re awake?” A note of excitement creeps into her voice. This would make for a hell of a book project. Maybe not an academic book, but she could finally write a self-help manual and make the NYT bestsellers list. Does Thedas have a bestsellers list?

“Not everyone is adept at it, but it has always come easily for me. We should see if this particular skill might be in your repertoire of latent talents as well.”

With her luck, it won’t be, and it’s going to be a long hard slog to learn anything useful. But if there’s anything that will get her away from the temptation to descend into hand-wringing misery — *woe is me, what does it all mean!* — it’s curiosity. Killed the cat in the end, but it had a fun life while it lasted.

Solas’s expression turns grave again. “There remains the practical matter of your conversation with the spymaster. If you are to survive in this world, you must learn all you can about it. Maile’s lover was a Tevinter mage. I would guess that her patrol was slaughtered at his behest, or with his prior knowledge.”

Margo nods, thinking. “So, not the Qunari, whoever they are, but...Tevinter?”

“Yes. Leliana will want to know this. As well as why you were spared when others were not. I do not recommend... telling her the truth. But be careful that she does not catch you in a lie either.”

“As long as she doesn’t strap me to a lie detector, I’ll manage.”

He looks puzzled for a second, and then he nods his understanding. “She will most certainly seek to minimize the likelihood of your dissimulating. And she may or may not restrain you, depending on whether she believes you present an immediate threat. Do you have your book with you?”

Margo gets up and reaches for her coat, still on the back of the chair. Solas follows, his posture studiously formal. After some patting of pockets, she pulls out Auntie's compendium and hands it to the elf. He leafs through until he lands on the desired page, and drums his long fingers against an inscription. "Ah, yes, it is here... this one. It is a standard antidote against most poisons that seek to bend your will."

Margo leans over to get a better look at the formula, and she suddenly becomes acutely aware of their proximity. He glances down at her, expression unreadable, and for a few seconds, their gazes snag again. Time hitches — an eternity trapped in a few moments — and then Margo forces her eyes back to the page.

Oh, fuck.

He hands her the formulary.

"Well..." Margo tucks the book away. She rubs her face with both hands, trying to regain a semblance of normalcy, but the features beneath her palms feel completely out of place. Right. Invasion of the Body Snatchers, in which the body snatchers are defeated because everything feels weird. "We should get some sleep."

The unintended irony of her statement is not lost on the elf. He hesitates for a second, but then his body language shifts. He clasps his hands behind his back, still standing beside her just a hair closer than polite distance. His face, in three-quarter profile, is bathed in shadow, the curve of a sharp cheekbone contoured by the unsteady light of the candle. He has the look of someone deliberating at a fork in the road. And then, decision made, Solas's expression becomes a bit cheeky, and Margo's ground drops from under her again, but for a whole new set of reasons. "The night is young. Are you quite certain you do not wish to dredge up a few of Maile's other indiscretions?"

Margo takes a closer look, and, yep. He's teasing. All right, then. So the elf has taken this whole damnable thing in stride, and with panache. She shouldn't have worried about any kind of lack of chutzpah, then. Apparently, he's got it in spades.

Oh, to hell with it. Making light of the whole blasted thing seems preferable to anxious wallowing. She grins. "And here I thought you mentioned that you would prefer a more conventional approach to the task."

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise, and then he is coughing — rather unconvincingly — into his fist. Margo smiles smugly. What's good for the goose and all that...

Solas collects himself quickly. "If by 'task' you mean helping a stranded spirit from an altogether different world survive the perils of this one, then I fear I cannot boast enough experience for anything approximating 'convention.'" A spark of mirth flickers in his eyes, the corners of his lips curving into a small smile. "As to the other matter, I suppose one should strive to balance the allure of the unexpected with the risk of unintended consequences."

Is this his idea of flirting? Or delivering a warning? Margo tries — and fails — to keep the butterfly infestation in check. She cuts him a narrowed-eye look, fishes for a clever comeback, and comes up with... absolutely nothing. For a very short moment, Solas looks like a cat who crunched through the canary, chased it down with some cream, and is currently contemplating the goldfish. And then his face shuts, and he gestures to the door. "Perhaps there will be future occasions to revisit this. Sleep well."

Margo can't tell whether it sounds like an invitation, a dismissal, or a suggestion. She draws a

breath. “Thank you. For your help.”

Solas says nothing, only peers at her again with that quizzical expression, so Margo nods, and proceeds to the door.

“A question, if I may?”

She stops with her hand on the door handle. “Go for it,” she says.

“The people you have encountered here so far... do you find them to be quite different? From those of your world, that is?”

She mulls this over. “We do look similar, as far as species go.” And, to be fair, the convergences are truly bizarre. What are the chances that another form of sentient life a universe away would have evolved along parallel paths? “But similarity doesn’t mean sameness, so I can’t say for certain yet. The magic is a bit of a doozy. And the variation of phenot-... physiques.”

His face remains unreadable save for a small frown, as if her response is not what he was expecting. Margo shrugs. “I suppose I have yet to encounter a spirit — or a demon. I might change my tune then.”

This seems to strike him as amusing, because his eyes crinkle in a smile. “I expect you might. And I would welcome the opportunity to hear your impressions, should this occur.”

As she leaves, she could swear she hears the softest of chuckles behind her.

Unspecified Local Deity preserve her from demons, hellmouths, and cheeky, mercurial elves.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Good Intentions INC, for all your paving needs.

Next up: alchemy tests

As always, thank you so much for your comments, kudos, and follows. <3

The title of this chapter is a nod to Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus.

The full line, (given to Mephistopheles), is: "Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris."
-- It is a comfort to the unfortunate to have had companions in woe. In other words, misery loves company.

Name your poison

Chapter Summary

In which Margo officially becomes an Apprentice Alchemist, and deals with an unlikely visitor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Margo runs to the apothecary, the wind slicing right through her coat. Despite the inclement weather, she almost wishes she had a longer way to go — she has jitters to burn off. She bursts through the door, shivering, only to find that the shop, which she had hoped would be deserted, is in fact very much occupied.

Master Adan is sitting at the desk, with a large bottle of something that looks like it'll put hair on your chest, and then burn it right off. He's not alone. Commander Rutherford is perched on a crate, looking in his ridiculous mantle every bit like a ruffled crow. He seems vexed and vaguely out of place. Right. *You know nothing, Jon Snow*. The apothecary's third occupant is an elven woman Margo has only briefly glimpsed before — a severe-looking redhead in some kind of fussy embroidered robe.

This makes the prospect of making the antidote Solas pointed out that much less likely.

“Ah, if it's not our prodigal alchemist in the making! Long night? Wherever have you been?” Adan leans back in his chair, drumming his fingers on the desk in an impatient rhythm.

Uh oh, what is this? Some kind of intervention? Of all the nights they could have picked... Margo narrows her eyes. The alchemist is giving her a slightly mocking look.

Right. Haven. Haven is a village. Villages tend to breed gossip like it's the ticket to wealth, prosperity, and an endless supply of plum liquor. Who needs security cameras when you have a village? Add to that a village run like a military camp with the secret police at the helm, and you get... well, the Inquisition.

Margo begins to unbutton her coat, because inside the apothecary the fireplace is roaring, and the heat is blistering. Which should account for the sweat suddenly prickling between her shoulder-blades.

“Do pull up a seat, my precocious pupil. I was just filling in Commander Rutherford and Enchanter Minaeve on your progress.”

Hell in a sack, what is this? Is this about his amrita vein supply? Did he notice she was poaching from the jar? She barely took anything.

Cullen clears his throat. “Actually, I've been meaning to talk to you, agent...?”

Margo is pretty sure he wants her to supply a name. What is the likelihood that he would settle for “Prickly”?

“I go by Margo these days,” she offers noncommittally, hoping that they’ll assume that it is simply one of Torquemada’s codenames. Spies have codenames, right? There’s no way that “Charter” is an actual name, unless her parents really had some kind of weird naming practice where you open a book at random and pick the first word that pops up.

“That doesn’t sound Elvhen,” Minaeve comments, whose name, of course, does sound “Elvhen,” all bright consonants and long vowels.

“It isn’t,” Margo offers cautiously, and wonders if she should have gone by Maile instead, though that would feel wrong on too many levels.

“You are scheduled to speak with Leliana tomorrow morning, correct?” Cullen seems like the most neutrally minded of the group. The other two look like they may have some additional agenda, aside from whatever Cullen is there for. Margo focuses on the military man.

“Yes, I believe she said at first light.”

“Good.” He nods to himself. “Once that’s over with... I — we — have a proposition for you.”

Interesting. Does this mean that Torquemada didn’t spread her gospel of paranoia about Margo’s status as a double agent for whatever the Qun might be? Are the local branches of government not on full disclosure terms? Unless the spymaster decided to hedge her bets, and suspects Maile’s non-involvement — but is lording this over her for other reasons? “Provided the spymaster finds our conversation to her satisfaction,” Margo supplies, voice as neutral as she can make it.

Cullen nods. “Provided that.”

So he must know at least something of Torquemada’s suspicions. “I’m listening,” she says.

Cullen leans forward on his crate, props his elbows on his knees, and clasps his hands together. The pose seems casual enough, but Margo can’t help but notice a kind of jitteriness to him. Maybe he’s got a secret stash of coffee somewhere.

“As you well know, we are very short on supplies, resources, and people. Insofar as this impacts Master Adan’s ability to enhance the Inquisition’s work, we need to source more — not just plants, but other ingredients as well. Elfroot, of course, is still a key strategic resource, but we can’t limit ourselves to defensive formulas.” He exchanges a look with the others. “Your injury was severe enough that I wouldn’t deploy you in your usual capacity, agent, but we can’t afford to get too picky, unfortunately. We’d like to send you to the field with a small group to scout for easily accessible locations of the things we might need. It won’t put you on the front lines. A discrete, minimal risk mission — you can collect whatever your team can carry, and then you’ll simply report back to me with a location.”

Margo’s eyes widen. Send her to the field? Sure, she can dig up some plants, and, as Solas would say, stuff them in a sack, but this? Last time she tried to do that, she almost got eaten by wolves. If it weren’t for the elf’s timely intervention... At the thought of said elf, Margo is unhappily surprised by a jolt of vertigo in the pit of her stomach. She winces.

Cullen interprets her expression as reticence. “I’m sorry, agent. If it were up to me, I’d set up a rotation schedule that allows for recovery, but we just can’t afford it — there are too few people to rotate.”

Shit. How is she supposed to survive without any fighting skills to speak of? Sure, Maile was a stabby sort. “Prickly” indeed. But Maile is no longer the one at the helm, and she can’t just rely on

instinct, hoping she will magically perform, like some kind of medieval Neo. “I know Kung-Fu.” Sure, hun. Kung-Fu won’t help much against an arrow to the face, or whatever other unpleasant weapons the locals deploy.

Margo casts Cullen a quick glance. He’s waiting patiently for her response, safe for a slight tremor in his left leg. Odd. He doesn’t strike her as the neurotic type.

“Commander Rutherford, I ... ah, appreciated the vote of confidence.” And she hopes he catches the double meaning, in regards to whatever Torquemada might have been telling him. “Whatever happened to me in the last battle — and I’m sorry I don’t remember much — I seem to be having trouble recalling basic combat techniques. I think I will be more useful to the Inquisition in a civilian capacity.”

At this point, Master Adan pipes up. “Since I am formally the closest thing you have to someone who’s willing to take responsibility for your ingredient pilfering, dangerous alchemical formula improvising hide...” He gives her a very pointed look, although it appears more amused and exasperated than angry. “I get to decide whether this would be helpful to *me* in *my* civilian capacity.”

Margo smiles at him, probably totally sheepishly. She likes Adan. And he is right. He did take a chance on her.

“So, unless the spymaster has other ideas about what to do with you, I think we should start planning for your first expedition,” Adan concludes.

Cullen offers her a surprisingly friendly smile. “As to the other issue, I’ve seen this sort of loss of function happen after head injuries. In my experience, skills can be retrained, provided dedication and hard work. Until we are able to increase our ranks — and add more specialized trainers — we will match you with someone who can help you get back up to speed. Varric can assist with some of the footwork, but you still need to re-learn how to hold you own against heavily armored opponents.”

Margo looks between the three of them in puzzlement. Is the Inquisition this desperate for cadres? And then, she reminds herself that she is not really an unknown quantity to them. Maile had fought alongside Cullen’s and Cassandra’s men.

She has almost forgotten about Minaeve. The elf chooses this moment to intervene. “While you’re out running your errands, would you do me a favor? My research depends on procuring some very specific ingredients from... Are you squeamish, agent?”

“Depends what you’re asking for,” Margo offers cautiously. This is going to be some gnarly animal parts stuff. The rare gland of some rare beast that’s going to eat you dead before you have a chance to get close to any useful anatomical structures it might have.

“In alchemy, we incorporate anything that is useful, and we are always seeking to expand our repertoire of substances,” Adan offers helpfully, pours himself two fingers of an opaque pink liquid that looks suspiciously like Pepto-Bismol from his bottle, and downs it in one gulp.

Cullen, looking a little pained at this point, decides to cut to the chase. “In the event that you run into some things we don’t know much about — demons, mainly — we’d like you to... Well. If anything useful remains from them once your team is done, Enchanter Minaeve here would love to take a look.”

“I would. Try not to damage the samples too much as you bring them back.”

“Although of course I expect you to bring some ingredients for the shop as well,” Adan adds, with a slightly cross look at the elven woman. “We’ll be starting on ichors next week.”

The matter apparently settled, Adan passes out mismatched receptacles in lieu of shot glasses. Cullen gets a clay mug, Minaeve something that is probably a wine glass, though the word “goblet” seems more fitting, and Margo gets a beaker. Adan pours the round, and despite the difference between the mismatched china, she is pretty sure he’s given them all the exact same amount. Alchemists...

“What is this, exactly?” Margo finally asks after sniffing the substance. It does not, in fact, smell like Pepto-Bismol. It has a distinctly ferrous odor...

“Archdemon’s Tears, it’s called.”

Margo quirks an eyebrow. “Is it?”

Adan guffaws, and then he’s joined by Minaeve’s rather more delicate trilling laughter. Even Cullen smiles his lopsided smirk that’s eerily like Jake’s.

“Of course not, lass. It’s mostly brandy, with an addition of fermented dragon’s blood and demon ichor extract. It’s what gives it that frothy, slippery consistency.” He swirls the disgusting thing in his glass with obvious relish. “Master Taigan had a bottle he had squirreled away for a special occasion.”

Wait. Did he say dragon? Dragon’s blood? As in, dragons are an actually existing thing?

Instead of all that, Margo, ever the diplomat, asks “So what’s the occasion?”

Cullen shrugs. “I guess we could say ‘field season,’ but to be honest with you, this is more of a tribute to whatever deities might be listening. We’re sending a team out tomorrow with...ah...Lady Trevelyan.”

Margo stills. They’re sending the kid out to the field? Tomorrow? What the actual fuck are these people thinking?

“Right. Have to start somewhere, Commander.” Adan raises his glass, and forces Cullen to toast with him. Minaeve gestures over the booze first — could be an offering to the gods, or could be a plain old spell to make the horrible substance taste less foul than it looks — and raises her glass too.

They are all looking at her expectantly, so Margo, with an internal wince, joins in the toast.

“To not everyone getting slaughtered right away,” Adan proposes tactfully.

Cullen shakes his head. “You know what, Adan, I will drink to that.”

And they all do. The drink tastes exactly as one might expect.

Once Margo is done blinking tears out of her eyes and clearing the burn from her throat, she turns her attention to Cullen. At least he seems a bit more relaxed now. The leg tremor is gone. “You are sending Evie out to get this healer in the Hinterlands, aren’t you?”

There’s a flash of surprise, but he hides it quickly. “We have to.” He sighs. “We all know she’s not ready.” He stares down at his drink, expression conflicted. A man responsible for the lives of others, making difficult calculations. “Solas, Cassandra, and Varric are really the only people who are remotely qualified to accompany her, though Andraste’s Ashes, I hate to risk them. But we

truly are out of time. Leliana's scouts will lay the ground work in preparation as much as they can." He shrugs. "Did I mention we are stretched thin? That was an understatement." He rubs the back of his head. "I just hope they all make it back in one piece. We can't afford more losses."

Margo's entire world careens off kilter. Oh, Evie, kiddo. The sudden anxiety grips her in its icy claws — the kid, but then, the others, too. It just had to be the people she's managed to establish some sort of rapport with. Varric, and the fact that she still owes him a beer, and wants to actually sit down and really hear his stories, both the ones that are inconsequential, and the ones that are deeply important to him, which he seems to mix in with the trifling ones so that no one would know which is which. And Cassandra — much as Margo finds the warrior princess's earnest intensity amusing (and not a little terrifying) — seems like she would die to protect Evie in a heartbeat, and Margo doesn't want to miss the chance to get to know what else might be there.

Solas. Oh, bloody hell — the blasted elf, cheeky temperamental unreadable bastard that he is — has so far proven an ally of sorts. That one, she *actually* owes, and she'd rather not get saddled with the karmic debt.

There is no way that this should feel like such a punch to the kidneys — she doesn't *know* them, any of them. But... Well. Beggars aren't choosers.

She reminds herself that they are all — well, except for Evie — battle-ready and trained, more than she will ever be. They can take care of themselves. But she would be blind not to notice the tension around Cullen's eyes, and the way that Master Adan has been guzzling booze like he wants to numb whatever thoughts he might be having on the prospective success of the whole operation.

And it really boils down to Torquemada's framing of the whole thing, crows take her shriveled little heart. They are all disposable. Cassandra, Varric, Cullen, Adan, and all of the spymaster's little birds, of course. Solas. Herself. If Evie can actually close the cosmic holes, they are all expendable, except for the kid. No matter what happens, Evie must live. And she thinks that any of the others — whatever their particular agendas might be — would lay down their lives to protect the kid. And if Evie can't fight — and not just that, if she can't stay out of the way — then the others have to compensate.

Margo rubs her face. One step at a time. Foot in front of the other. She's got other things to worry about right now.

"When do you want me to go?" she asks Cullen.

"A day or two at most. You'll be following closely in the footsteps of the main team to lend a hand if needed. At the very least, you can keep the field infirmary stocked and operative. We can't keep sitting on our hands for longer than that."

Adan pours another round, and they all drink it in silence. The second time, the foul shit doesn't burn quite as much.

After that, Cullen gets up, and says his goodbyes. Minaeve and Adan don't appear to be in a hurry to depart, and Margo has the unpleasant suspicion that there is another conversation that is about to happen once the Commander is out of earshot.

She's right. "So," Adan starts, with a quick look at Minaeve, who gives him a subtle nod.

Margo makes a face that she hopes conveys polite interest.

"You were trained by a hedge-witch, you say."

Margo blinks at him. Where is this going? “I was, yes.”

“Raised by one?” Margo hesitates, and then nods. Baba would approve.

“But you yourself are not an apostate? You do not have magic, correct?” Minaeve observes, with just a tiny note of haughtiness.

“That’s correct. None whatsoever, as far as I know.”

Adan smiles to himself, somehow pleased. “Good, good. Here is the thing, fledgling. The profession has rules. Like everything else has rules. Hierarchies. Levels of accomplishment. If you’re a mage trained in a Circle, there are some magics you can use, and others you can’t. Same rules apply with Alchemy.”

She makes a mental note to figure out what a Circle is. Either way, this is going to be a lecture about helping herself to ingredients and mixing up random potions out of turn, she’s pretty sure. Margo braces herself for an exposition on proper professional conduct.

“But apostates... like, say, your friend Solas,” at this Adan gives her a very weighty look, “don’t have quite the same compunctions. They are, as it were, outside the law, and will use magic in whatever way they see fit.”

Ok, maybe a lecture about the dangers of associating with apostates?

“Put very bluntly, I don’t have time to train you in the proper order. The world is ending. The Inquisition is hanging on by a thread. Yet, there are principles. We’re not going to descend into savagery, are we clear? You need to at be an apprentice to be able to do some of the work we need. Transmogrifying metals, for one. Lyrium, for another. Ichors. And I’m not about to trust an unqualified ‘dabbler’ with rare and precious plants. Don’t think I didn’t notice your tea-making efforts.” He shakes his head.

Instead of feeling mortified, Margo practically vibrates with the excitement of sudden realization. He’s talking about ritual empowerments. It’s a living lineage tradition, but with empowerments, which means there’s going to be distinct theories of potency and a whole cosmological system that comes with that. Secret knowledge. She could do a whole monograph on this, and there she was, struggling with coming up with a solid second research project. And she can do ethnography-based research. Take that, tenure promotion committee!

Except, of course, it’s unlikely that she’ll get tenure at her university considering her original body is likely not showing up at work anymore, if it’s even alive, but details, right? She can be an independent scholar. At least, she won’t have to deal with the Institutional Review Board to get her research approved. Take that, IRB.

Margo finds herself grinning like a maniac.

Adan and Minaeve exchange a look. “Did I mention to you that she’s an odd lass?”

“Once or twice,” Minaeve offers dryly.

“In any case, this is why Minaeve is here. We need a witness.”

“We are going to do this now?” Margo asks, somewhere between thrilled and terrified. She doesn’t even have a notebook to write this all down. Or a recorder. Ethnographers use recorders, right?

“No sense in delaying it.”

“So what do I do?”

Adan straightens, adopting an officious expression. “Enchanter Minaeve is going to pick a formula for you to make. Traditionally, the chosen potion is a poison, and you will then have however much time you have left to make an antidote, and counteract the poison's effects.”

Well, that doesn't sound like a very sustainable way of going about it. She wonders what the attrition rate for alchemy students is.

Minaeve gives her a tense smile. “Do not worry. Adan and I have already discussed this. The test is largely a formality, and because we are doing it in such a hurried manner — and because you already do have some training — I have picked a formula that will make you... uncomfortable, but most likely will not kill you.”

Another silent look passes between Adan and the elf.

Margo looks at the Enchanter more carefully. There's something distinctly... devious about Minaeve's expression. It's going to be an emetic, isn't it? Or something else that causes digestive unpleasantness.

Not one to waste valuable time, Minaeve passes her a vellum. Margo takes it, noting the slight tremor in her hand as she does. This is all well and good, but really, they have to do this today of all days? She's had enough wonky formulas to last her at least a week. And there is the matter of her talk with Torquemada, though perhaps she can kill two birds with one stone, and make the antidote for both occasions.

She lays the vellum down on the workstation, and puts Auntie's compendium next to it.

“How much time do I have?” she asks, settling into the new task.

“However much you need,” Minaeve offers, and again, she seems a little... gleeful, for lack of a better word.

Oh, this is going to suck.

The name of the formula on top of the ingredient list is not particularly legible. Something that starts with "Imsh" or "Imsn" - the rest is smudged - and then another word, which reads like "barge," or "farge." The ingredient list is not too complicated. One measure of “Some Fungus,” also known as deep mushroom, of the blightcap variety. Sounds unpleasant. Three measures of amrita vein, which she already knows. And five measures of something called “witherstock.” Grind, mix, boil, and add a spoonful of honey.

As she assembles the ingredients, Master Adan passes her a jar of something containing a reddish-brown powder that smells like an unholy mixture of vanilla bean and three-day-old dirty socks.

“Witherstock,” he offers, by way of an explanation.

At this, he and the Enchanter exchange yet another pointed look. Aha, so this witherstock is likely what will cause the toxicity.

In about fifteen minutes, she has a dry mixture to set on a water bath, and Margo peeks at the antidote formula that Solas had pointed out to her.

Except, of course, there's a hitch. “Master Adan? Do we have a seven-year old red headed bastard's urine on hand? Or do we substitute? And by bastard, does Ines mean a child out of

wedlock, or is that a commentary on the donor's character?"

Adan chokes on his Pepto-Bismol. "You're trying to make Andraste's Promise? Why?" He frowns. "That's against mind-warping potions. How did you..." He cuts himself off.

Again, that silent look. This time, a very suspicious one. Aha. Good to know. So... not bowel movement troubles. The formula they want her to drink must be some kind of mind-altering substance. A hallucinogen? She's had enough hallucinations for the day, thank you very much.

"Can I make it? As in, do we have the ingredients?"

Adan shrugs. "You can use the urine of a red-haired druffalo instead of the original. But there's also a simplified formula. One that skips the dawn lotus root. It's not as effective, of course, but in a pinch..."

Right, so no dawn lotus root, no detoxifying in urine necessary, and hence, no red-headed bastards required. Sounds good.

Master Adan takes the opportunity to write out the less fussy recipe next to Auntie's original one. Margo takes a look. A five ingredient deal, fairly straight forward by the looks of it. She can do it.

"As a reminder, you cannot start on the antidote before you have ingested the assigned potion. The point of this test is not just to see how well you acquit yourself in the technical aspects of the craft, but whether you have the strength of character for the practice." That prissy tirade is from Minaeve, of course.

It does make some sense. She should be able to work under duress. She just hopes that if it is a hallucinogenic, her mind doesn't manifest something really unpleasant, like, say, murderous psychotic clowns. Psychotic clowns would be distracting.

Another ten minutes of minding the water bath, and the concoction is ready. It no longer smells of vanilla. Just socks.

Margo picks up the pot with a rag, and pours its contents into a fresh beaker.

"Do I wait for it to cool? Or can I sip it?"

Maybe there's a nifty magical way to cool the liquid.

Master Adan hands her another beaker. "Just..." he waves his hand. "Pour it back and forth a bit."

Ooh. High tech. She does as instructed, pouring the potion from one beaker to the other until it's drinkable.

"How much of it do I need?"

Adan holds up two fingers. Right. Double shot. She measures out approximately 40 ml, and leaves the rest of the brew on the table.

"Not toasting to all living beings this time," Margo cautions.

Adan just shakes his head in bafflement.

She knocks it back. Yup. Socks. She waits. When nothing interesting happens, Margo gets up, and starts to gather ingredients for Andraste's Promise. A strange, whispering sound rustles at the edges of her hearing, but other than that, everything seems much the same. No clowns. So far so good.

The antidote calls for dried bees. She's pretty sure she's seen a jar of them on the top shelf. She reaches, grabs it, and when she turns around, there is a third guest in the room.

Ah, shit.

Well, at least it's not a clown.

Solas is leaning casually against a bookshelf, every bit the Leftist intellectual, complete with the slightly mocking smirk.

Margo cuts him a dirty look, and hauls her bees to the work table. "Don't you have a revolution to start?" she grumbles under her breath.

"Ah. Da'elgar. How very interesting. Fancy meeting you here. Whatever trouble are you in?"

She's about to inform him that he doesn't, technically, exist, except something is definitely going wonky with her perception. The sound of his voice sends a shiver down her spine, and then it settles somewhere in the general direction of what her very perky yoga instructor, a lifetime ago, liked to call her "root chakra." As in, "you should feel this stretch in your root chakra," which, obviously, is a lot more palatable to the bourgeois sensibilities of middle-class urban yogis than its crasser anatomical analogue.

Oh, hell no. Really? A hallucinogenic aphrodisiac? That's what they decided to go with?

She steals a glance at Adan and Minaeve. The bastards are all settled in, clearly intent on watching the show. "Enchanter Minaeve, would you consider donating some urine at a later date?" Margo asks acerbically. Maybe any old red-headed bastard would do.

Minaeve looks suitably incensed. Adan just grins. "Ah, I think it's kicked in."

Solas — who is really not there, Margo reminds herself — moves to stand beside the work table, presumably to get a better look at what she's doing. Except that her body isn't at all buying the illusory nature of the whole experience, because her heartbeat quickens, and a not altogether unpleasant — though certainly uncomfortable — pulling sensation spreads through her lower belly. She forces herself to pick up the mortar and pestle to start on the bees. Right. Bees. Grinding bees into powder. A completely reasonable task, that. Very absorbing.

Except, she can barely focus with him there.

"Shoo," Margo tells the phantom, feeling both cross with herself, and with him, and with the whole absurdity of the situation. She's met with an amused little smirk. "Fine. Minimally, make yourself useful."

This, apparently, was not the right thing to say. The illusory elf glides right behind her then, his legs almost brushing the back of her thighs as she leans over her work. She stills. And then — she should ask him to donate some urine too while she's at it, maybe just about any bastard would do — slides his hands over her hips, and pulls her gently against himself. She watches, a little mesmerized, as one hand then lands next to Auntie's book on the workbench. The other arm encircles her waist, and locks her firmly in place. And then he leans forward a bit, and rests his chin on her shoulder, lips at her ear.

"Ah. What have they made you drink? Something that creates a little Fade pocket for you to get lost in, it seems," he whispers. "I may be able to... help."

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" she manages to grind out, around the furiously beating pulse in her

throat.

“What makes you believe I am not?” he chuckles, and she can feel its rumble against her back.

Oh hell on a stick, what if it’s not entirely a hallucination? Wait. Maybe then she can reason with him — somehow impart on him that this shit is important, and that she is in the middle of something here. (What is she in the middle of, exactly? Something to do with bees. Bees? Why the hell is she pulverizing the poor things?) But of course, it’s taking everything she’s got not to, say, shimmy her hips — purely out of academic curiosity, mind you — and see what reaction might ensue. Of course, it might look a bit undignified, with the peanut gallery sitting there at the edge of their seats. But on the other hand, it’s not like they can see the hallucination. And the hallucination probably doesn’t see them, either. Besides, people shimmy all the time, for all kinds of reasons, don’t they? And when else will she have the opportunity to test whether hallucinations follow a predetermined script, or adapt to input from their environment?

So, she does it. And there is definitely a reaction. And a very solid one at that, for a phantom. She’s also pressed more tightly against the work table, and has to brace herself against it with both hands, lest she collapse into the damnable bees.

“I am reasonably sure I could help with that as well, if that is your wish.”

The peanut gallery leans forward. All they’re missing is popcorn.

Right. A test of will. Wasn’t that Enchanter Minaeve little shtick? “I’m a little busy,” she manages.

Another chuckle she feels right down to her core. “So it appears. Do not let me distract you.”

She exhales through her teeth. At least the bees are kind of powdery now. What was that about rashvine? “Don’t flatter yourself. You’re only in my head,” she grumbles, with a whole lot less certainty that she’d like, and of course, the hallucination knows this perfectly well because it succumbs to another fit of quiet hilarity.

“Only in your head, am I? Should I take this as a challenge? Or an invitation?” the so-not-real elf asks, and then his teeth graze her earlobe. Elven ears, it turns out, are rather sensitive. Margo’s legs turn liquid. The only thing keeping her upright is the work table — and the phantom’s unreasonably tangible grip.

“Please.” At this point, it’s more of a whimper, really. The blasted concoction must be in full swing, because all she can think of is what his lips might taste like, and whether he’s Ok with tongue. Although they are better positioned for other sorts of things. They could just cut to the chase, and keep the kissing for after. Which opens a whole other avenue for speculations. “Don’t sabotage me,” she finally whispers, before all capacity for critical thinking evaporates.

Solas, who is not there at all, stills. And then the illusion steps back, and Margo can breathe a little bit more effectively again.

“Ah, vhenan. Is that the word?” And for a hallucination, there is very convincing regret in his voice, but also something... not quite right, like a subtle dissonance. “Very well, little spirit. I suppose we will have the chance to revisit this.”

She looks at him then, and in that moment, her mind almost cracks at the irresolvable uncertainty of his presence.

“Help me get through this?” she finally pleads, trying, and largely failing, to keep her eyes locked with his, and not on his lips, or the line of his jaw, or the sharp contour of his cheekbones, or the

cute dimple on his chin or... further down on all the other details she hasn't really had a chance to properly consider yet. The elf, damn him, notices this of course, and imposes no such artificial restrictions on himself. Margo feels her cheeks burn at what is, by any definition, a rather exploratory gaze. "You're a tease, and a flirt, and I will sprinkle stinging nettles in your underwear drawer if you don't desist," she promises.

He cocks an eyebrow, clearly amused, and he considers her with another one of his cheeky little smirks.

"That's cheating!" Minaeve pipes up, a bit belatedly. "You cannot solicit help from or threaten the illusions."

"No, that's absolutely within the rules." That's Master Adan, and when Margo looks, he is actually giving her an encouraging smile, and a firm nod.

She's still going to get these two for this. Vengeance. Cold dish. All that.

"You would ask for my help, da'elgar?" Solas, who might or might not be really there, asks. "And what would you require of me?"

Too many things, apparently, Margo thinks, because pretending to yourself that you're not stuck in emotional entanglement shit creek without a paddle isn't a very effective way to get the proverbial canoe moving. "Distract me in other ways. Tell me about the Fade," she asks instead.

He smiles, and perches on the side of the desk, next to the workstation. As she works, slowly, pulled taught by the tug of war between her mind and her body, he tells her of dwarven ruins, of long forgotten warriors and ancient battlefields. He tells her of elven clans beset by terrible curses, and of spirits wandering the shifting landscape, their very names forgotten. The images he conjures are overwhelmingly dark - every single one a story of desolation, ruin, and loss. Still, on a better day, she would be delighted at his penchant for a iambic meter. But with the hellish concoction coursing through her, she feels the cadence of his speech as her own heartbeat, a burn in her veins she does not have a name for.

And then, the antidote is done, and she drinks it right away, scorching herself in the process. She looks at her hallucinatory companion. "Thank you," she says simply.

He smiles. "It was... a pleasure, little spirit. Until we meet again." And then, with a reddish shimmer, he's gone.

"Congratulations, apprentice." Master Adan says. "You passed with flying colors."

The Enchanter makes a noncommittal humph, and picks up the rest of the hellish potion. "We will be taking this now."

"To dispose of safely," Master Adan supplies, with a quick glance at the elven woman.

Margo looks between the pair. Sure you will, you pervy bastards. Right down the hatch.

And then she marches off to the attic, and collapses on the mattress. She's asleep in under a minute. And mercifully, there are no dreams.

This chapter was brought to you by "spot the difference." Also by witherstock, which has one of the most hilarious codex entries, and has largely inspired the premise of this chapter.

In case you were curious, a seven year old boy's urine is a thing in some traditions for detoxifying poisonous ingredients. As is the urine of a red-haired cow. I improvised from there.

Next up: Leliana (aka Torquemada)

The Highest Thing that Man May Keep

Chapter Summary

In which Margo has her chat with Torquemada

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

During the first few moments of wakefulness, Margo has absolutely no idea where she is. She reaches over, expecting Mindy's furry butt strategically parked on the pillow next to her, but her fingers encounter emptiness — neither cat butt, nor pillow. Only some kind of prickly texture that smells of hay, and, faintly, of some musky animal scent she can't quite identify.

The past day comes back to her slowly, like something half-drowned drifting just below the surface of murky waters. The picture refuses to resolve into anything understandable, and her throat seizes with the acute anguish of *misplacement*. Perhaps this is how shipwreck survivors might feel once they wake up, parched and sun-blistered, on alien shores.

Sitting up requires some vestibular exertion. Her borrowed body still doesn't fit quite right — the field of peripheral vision seems entirely too wide, as if the spacing of her eyes allows for a wider angle of perception. In the semi-darkness of the apothecary, the colors are too bright, an oversaturation that skews towards jeweled tones, but loses crispness. She rubs her eyes, trying to get them to focus. An evolutionary trade-off for better night vision, perhaps? Of course, it might just be the effect of the night's alchemical hangover. Too many toxic substances on short notice. Sorry, liver. At least, she presumes there is a liver.

Margo uses the wall to stabilize herself, desperately wishing for a hot shower, or better yet, a long hot soak — or anything else that would reassert a sense of normalcy, however flimsy. At least the clothes aren't too smelly yet, courtesy of Solas's dry-cleaning spell. She doesn't remember undressing. She tries to recall her last meal, but the thought is, at best, an abstraction. Instead, her stomach feels like it's having an identity crisis about its role in the great digestive scheme of things. The pangs are perfectly recognizable as nausea, so that part works by and large the same way.

Well, what do you know, Minaeve's chosen potion really did cause unpleasant gastric symptoms after all.

The memories of the previous night are... not fuzzy, exactly, but so entirely surreal that Margo has no idea where to start with processing them. For the sake of sanity — or what passes for it these days — it would behoove her to put the entire culsterfuck aside. She'll deal with it later. It'll be right there where she left it, and she has bigger fish to fry at the moment.

The most immediate fish being Torquemada.

Margo descends the rickety steps to the ground floor — maneuvering her body feels like trying to pilot the prototype of some finicky and not entirely stable apparatus, the kind that ends up in history textbooks as "the first attempt" at whatever new harebrained idea humanity came up with. The shop is still empty. The opaque glass in the window is dark. No sign of "first light" — or any light

at all safe for the flicker of a torch moving around outside.

She finds the note next to a stoppered bottle on the table. In addition to the mystery potion and missive, a clay carafe filled with a dark, bitter-smelling liquid and a plate of bread, cheese, and pickled vegetables are waiting for her, all covered with a questionable dish rag. Margo unfolds the note.

“Apprentice,

Congratulations, again. Welcome to the ranks (officially).

Drink the draught — your liver will thank you for it. If you’re still alive by afternoon, come find Cullen and I for further instructions.

~A.

PS: You did well for yourself, fledgling. I’ve seen Imshael’s Bargain really do a number on much more experienced candidates. Fun as it is to watch, I had hoped you’d manage to muddle through it, and you did.

PPS: You’re going to want to puke your guts out this morning, but make sure you eat anyway.”

Well, that confirms it. There is a liver.

She drinks the draught first. It tastes very pleasantly of verbena and hibiscus, and less pleasantly of rotten eggs. More importantly, it works as intended. By the time she manages to convince herself that the need to eat is not just a cultural construction and starts in on the cheese and bread, Margo is feeling more or less like her old self. Or new self. At least, the shimmery jeweled tones resolve into a more pedestrian palette.

She pours herself a cup of the still warm liquid from the carafe — while it doesn’t smell exactly like coffee, there is definitely an earthy, nutty aroma that might very well signal the presence of caffeine.

The knock on the door makes her jump, and the next few moments are spent muttering profanities, and trying to mop up the spilled non-coffee with the dish rag. After she fails to open the door immediately, the knock repeats, more insistent.

“It’s me, Prickly. You presentable?”

Margo stares at the door for a few seconds before walking over and admitting her unusually early visitor inside. The storm has subsided, but not before delivering about three feet of snow. There is a Varric-sized tunnel in the snowbank in front of the apothecary.

“You must be freezing. Would you like some c-... something warm to drink?”

“I won’t say no, Prickly. Maker’s Balls, it’s cold.” Varric knocks the snow off his boots before proceeding inside. He settles on the chair vacated earlier by Enchanter Minaeve, props one ankle over a leather-clad knee, and unbuttons the top of his coat — the better to show off the chest hair, no doubt. Margo offers him a passably clean beaker, filling it up with the coffee substitute.

She takes the other chair across from him, and huddles around her cup, trying to soak up its warmth with her palms. The hearth fire is down to flickering embers. She wonders, in passing, whether some part of Thedas might be doing the sensible thing, and using clay stoves. From what she has seen of the houses in Haven, most seem not quite built for the weather — as if all built at the same

time, and modeled for a warmer climate.

Varric, in the meantime, is no hurry to explain the reason behind his visit — he is content to simply sit, observe her, and sip his drink.

“So. To what do I owe the pleasure?” Margo ventures when it becomes abundantly clear that he is waiting her out.

“Catching you at a bad time?” He squints, an amused little spark in his amber eyes. “I hear you got an appointment with the Nightingale. Thought you could use an unwelcome tagalong — or, at least, someone to deliver a rallying speech before the event in question. See, Prickly, I’ve been on the pointy end of those talks, so I figured least I could do is give you a sense of how these tend to proceed.” The dwarf sounds sarcastic and dead serious all at the same time.

“My guess would be, mostly poorly,” Margo offers.

“Yep. Emotional manipulation, mind games, threatening your loved ones, lectures about poor life choices, and, when all else fails, good old torture. The classic repertoire.”

Margo shuts her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. Not that she was expecting tea and cookies, but hearing what she can look forward to from an eyewitness is a whole new magnitude of unpleasant. “So. As the recipient of the aforementioned treatment. Do you think there’s anything I can do to make the whole experience... less life-threatening?”

Varric grins, and takes a big gulp of his non-coffee, helps himself to a pickled vegetable, and masticates thoughtfully. “As a matter of fact, Prickly, I do. Worst vice is advice, eh?” He brandishes the pickle for emphasis. “Take it from a professional storyteller. All other things being equal, best to tell the truth. Just decide which truth you don’t mind sharing.”

Margo considers this. The trouble is that she herself doesn’t have a very firm way of evaluating the “truthfulness” of any of this world’s propositions, in particular after last night’s debacles. Case in point, spirits, demons, and nocturnal visitors of the illusory persuasion who may or may not be familiar elves. And from there, all other claims to truth seem to suffer from a bad case of relativity. Besides, the chances that any revelation of her alien status would be received with more magnanimity than the tried and true “burn the witch” method are rather low.

“Truth, though, is a tricky thing, isn’t it?” The dwarf gives her a curious look, so Margo forges on. “Can I ask you a rather random question?”

“I love random questions, Prickly. They always make for the best stories.”

Great. “How can you tell if something is an illusion?” She pauses. Here is to hoping that he will simply attribute the vertiginous non sequitur to her alleged head trauma. “As in, how can you tell that something is actually real? Not only in your head, but actually the reflection of an objective reality? Like, the Fade, say? Is it real?”

Varric whistles between his teeth. “You know, asking a dwarf about the Fade is sort of like asking a blind man what color the sky is.”

He takes a sip from his cup.

Margo frowns. Now, why would that be? The logical conclusion is that dwarves don’t have access to the Fade — what does that mean, practically speaking? She tries to reroute her thoughts to the problem at hand. One thing at a time, and all that. “Let’s hypothetically say that you’re exposed to something that causes you to hallucinate. I’m trying to figure out whether the hallucinations are

just in my head, or if they've got some grounding in truth."

The dwarf examines her with his very unassumingly careful stare, and then nods slowly. "I don't think there's an easy answer to that. Let's take a few different examples. Knew a guy once — real nug-humping dipbag, but I digress. Anyway, got ahold of a powerful artefact, the kind that makes you hear things. Sure enough, he went completely ballistic. Lots of slaughtering of innocents and such. Now, was it all in his head? Or was there something about the artifact that *wanted* him to do these things?" Varric shrugs, lost in thought. "Honestly, Prickly, I don't know. On the other hand, you have your run of the mill desire demon that feeds you happy thoughts until you're pretty much nothing more than a drooling husk. And in the end, it always turns out to be a purple lady with a cone-shaped head and a truly impressive..." Varric gestures, in a bid to communicate which part of the cone-shaped lady impressed itself on his memory. "Anyway. Point is, that's not what you see when you come across one of the bastards."

Margo shivers, her forearms breaking out in sudden goosebumps. "A desire demon?"

"Never seen one of them? I mean, some have specific names. Mostly, though they tend to go with whatever's in vogue with the clientele of, say, The Blooming Rose. Not to say that all the girls at the Rose are desire demons, though there was that one time..."

Margo decides that whatever kind of establishment The Blooming Rose is, it is unlikely to be a burger joint.

"Wait..." The proverbial light bulb goes off... Or, rather, flickers on with a sputter — her capacity for critical thinking is not at its sharpest. Really, she should have put two and two together earlier. "So there are demons. And then there are spirits. Are they qualitatively analogous?"

Varric harrumphs. "You know, Prickly, you and Chuckles would really hit it off. He's a sucker for a fancy turn of phrase too. And he likes to overthink everything. Anyway, that's the golden nug question, right there. Depends on who you ask. If you want the Chantry version, then yeah, they're all bad news, all determined to turn mages to blood magic and lead poor hapless Templars into temptation. If you want a more nuanced answer — again, hit up Chuckles. I'm sure he'll be more than happy to deliver a lecture. Just don't tell Curly I sent you, he'll get his knickers in a twist. And then he'll go tattle to the Seeker." The dwarf sighs his resignation. "We're going to be ass deep in apostates and Templars as it is, and I really don't want another lecture on the dangers of moral relativism as we trudge through the mess in the Hinterlands."

Why is it that every conversation with the dwarf seems to end with "go ask Solas?"

Varric, in the meantime, narrows his eyes at her. "How did we get to this topic anyway? Are you seeing weird shit too, in addition to memory loss?"

"Something like that."

"Heh. How's your memory? Anything come back?"

Margo nibbles on a piece of cheese as she thinks. Eventually, she shrugs. "Actually, yes. Some of it."

"Well, let's hope whatever you got makes Nightingale happy. And on that note... You ready for the chopping block?"

Questionable metaphors aside, she supposes there's no point in delaying the inevitable, so Margo picks up the rest of the antidote from the previous night, and she downs the cold liquid with a

disgusted shudder. Sorry, liver.

They walk out of the apothecary and make their way towards the temple. The sky is overcast, but the early morning gloom seems to suggest that somewhere, in a better world, the sun is thinking of making an appearance. Here is to hoping that “first light” is not designed to be an exact description.

The camp is oddly lively already. Workers — most of them elves — bustle about, carrying crates and sacks. Soldiers, their faces still soft with sleep, trail down towards the training grounds.

“Animated this morning,” Margo remarks mostly to herself.

“Like the Gallows on Refugee Referral day. That’s the thing, Prickly. We’re slated to leave mid-morning.” The dwarf’s voice is not particularly jovial.

“You’re also of the persuasion that this is a bad idea?”

Varric sighs. “I just have a bad feeling about this. And the thing is, I’m usually right about these things.”

They stop a few yards from the Spymaster’s tent. “Listen, in case shit goes tits up for either of us...”

She pivots to face the dwarf, and sure enough, there is no trace of his usual humor. He looks like someone who’s seen too many things go “tits up” in his lifetime, and is proper sick of it.

“You want me to relay any sort of message? I know you and Evie hit it off. Something tells me the kid would feel better with a rousing speech in person, but failing that, do you want me to pass your warm regards?”

Margo forces a smile. “Tell her to not get killed. And to stay away from fruity drinks.” She hesitates. “And tell her she can do this.”

He grins at her. “That, I can do, Prickly. Don’t worry, won’t let any bad sorts get anywhere near her while I’m around, or they’ll have a nice little chat with Bianca’s business end. Besides, the Seeker is enough of a fun repellant in her own right, can’t imagine there’ll be too many amorous suitors with her around. Anything else? How about Chuckles, any messages for him?”

She can’t help but wonder why he’s asking. But of course, she has a suspicion that Varric notices a whole lot more than he lets on. “Just...” What the hell can she actually say? “Tell him that next time he suggests I make a formula that requires druffalo piss — or any other kind of bodily fluid — I’m going to send him to collect it.”

Varric guffaws. “That, Prickly, I will relay, just to see the expression on his face.”

She considers him for a few seconds. “Varric, stay safe. All of you. I still owe you an ale, remember?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I never forget.” He claps her on the shoulder. “See you on the other side.”

And with this, he turns around, and starts trudging down the slope. Margo squashes the feeling that she’s not going to see any of them again with a firm mental whack, and covers the distance to the tent.

As it turns out, Torquemada is already waiting, once again contemplating her maps. Does she ever get cold? Scratch that, does she ever sleep? Or eat? Or do anything besides being quietly

menacing?

“Ah, good of you to come in such a timely fashion, agent. Shall we?”

Margo nods, and follows the woman towards the temple. They walk in silence into the structure’s foyer, and for a few seconds Margo gawks at the soaring columns and beautiful masonry. The building is truly majestic, and on a better day she would love to get a sense of its layout to glean the underpinning symbolism of its architecture.

“This way,” Torquemada directs, down a narrow stone staircase into what is either a crypt, or a dungeon, or a combination of the two. Torquemada, for her part, keeps herself just a few feet behind, and Margo has to contend with the unnerving feeling that at any point she might get shoved down the stairs.

She wonders briefly at the absence of guards. Either the spymaster is confident that Margo will not try anything funny, or that any attempt at resistance can be easily squashed.

They make it down to a room with a desk, two chairs, and something that looks a whole lot like a rack of primitive dentistry instruments, although Margo is reasonably certain that their actual purpose is not to mend the results of poor dental hygiene.

“Please,” the Spymaster offers. “Do sit.”

The chair looks unassuming enough. Margo sits.

“Do not let our lack of escort deceive you, my agents are everywhere in the building. If you try to resist, you will not get much further than the confines of this room,” Torquemada informs her in a light conversational tone.

As if to prove the point, an elf with a large burn scar across one cheek partially obscured by an oversized green hood materializes from behind a column — although the effect is more like he’s just risen out of primordial emptiness — and snaps a pair of manacles on Margo’s wrists before she can even try to put up any sort of protest.

Torquemada brings a neat little leather case from the dentistry rack, unfolding it on the table with pedantic meticulousness. Predictably, its contents do not inspire optimism.

“I have no taste for this sort of thing, agent,” the spymaster declares, and by the tone of her voice, Margo actually believes her. This is all business, no pleasure. “So I am hoping we can avoid any unnecessary unpleasantness, and keep the conversation civil. And to this end...”

Margo watches, mesmerized, as the spymaster extracts a needle from the case, and proceeds to dip it into a narrow vial of murky liquid. With any luck, it’s some kind of disinfectant solution, because otherwise Margo really can’t recall when her last tetanus booster was.

“Hold out your hand, please.”

“May I ask what this is?” Margo manages, because asking an excessive amount of technical questions about unpleasant procedures is how she’s always dealt with doctors’ appointments and other such encounters. Not that she’s had experience with outright torture before...

“Ah, of course. I forget that you are now pursuing alchemy. This is something that was developed by the Antivan Crows, specifically for interrogating assassins that are suspected of going rogue. The recipe is a trade secret, you understand, but I can tell you a little bit about the effects, if you’re interested.”

Assassins gone rogue? Oh dear ill-tempered local deity...

“By all means,” Margo grits through her teeth, which she’s desperately trying to keep from chattering uncontrollably.

Torquemada smiles pleasantly. “Here.” Before Margo can react, the redhead — should ask her for some urine too — jabs the needle into the tip of Margo’s finger. The prick is sharp, but no worse than getting a blood sample.

“Good. Now, while it’s taking effect... The reason we use this now is that anything administered orally is too easily counteracted with something like Andraste’s Promise or any other readily available antidote. You know, it’s quite amusing, even something as simple as charcoal can offset a lot of effects. And we wouldn’t want that.”

Is she talking about activated carbon? They have activated carbon in Thedas? Margo shakes her head. Of course they do.

And of course, they would have anticipated any commonly available antidote.

“And this particular formula has the advantage of doing a lot of the work that would be traditionally done by a specialist without resorting to more... intensive procedures. This profession can be difficult on people.”

Right. Torturers get burned out. Tragic, that. Maybe they have a good union.

“In any case, this is a simple interrogation formula. It produces extremely uncomfortable effects when a suspect tries to lie. This, in turn, leads to two results. First, that your body will quickly dissuade you from lying, and second, that lies are easily noticeable based on body language, such that even an untrained interrogator can usually get a good read on the situation.”

Lecture delivered, Torquemada proceeds to sit on the other side of the desk.

“Any questions?”

“How long do the effects last?” Margo asks, and at this point, something must be happening, because she is feeling oddly relaxed.

“An hour or two at most. That is usually more than enough time.”

Margo nods. She is a bit dismayed to find herself giving Torquemada a friendly smile. Because really, the spymaster is very helpful in explaining all this, and it’s nice that she’s taken the time...

Uh-oh.

“Good. It looks like we can start any time. So, we will proceed as follows. I will ask you questions, and you will answer them. Really, that is all there is to this. And when we’re done... Well. Let us not get ahead of ourselves. Shall we?”

Margo nods again.

“What happened to your patrol?”

Well, that part, at least, is easy. “They were killed.” She looks for a change in her general physical state, but there isn’t one. Well, maybe a slight sense of accomplishment at a job well done.

“Indeed they were. Did you kill them?”

“No.” Same effects. She can do this.

“Good. Did you know they would get slaughtered?”

“No.” So far so good.

“Were they killed by the Qunari?”

“No.” She can totally do this.

“Do you know who?”

“Yes. Tevinter mages.”

This seems to give Torquemada some food for thought, because the redhead hesitates for a few moments, a slight frown on her face. While she’s deliberating with herself, Margo finds that her hands have become very sensitive, and she’s obsessively fiddling with a sharp metal snag that protrudes from one of her manacles. It’s a twist in the metal that almost feels like the tip of a dull pair of scissors. Maybe someone tried to break free, and didn’t quite manage the job, but mangled the manacles in the process. Right. Just like the Inquisition to use second-hand restraints.

Her hands are in her lap, and she hopes that Torquemada doesn’t notice and immediately assume that she’s picking a lock (as if she could), and not just neurotically fiddling with the cuffs.

“What were you doing when the patrol was attacked?”

Ah. And that’s where the proverbial tires hit the road. Margo works against the compulsion to blurt out that she was boinking a guy in robes — and then supply some more helpful details, like the fact that the mage was quite attractive and very good at it, but not quite her type. Or that she’s not entirely sure what to make of the fact that the only reason she knows this is because Solas had reconstructed the memory for her. And that the whole thing led to a pretty awkward thing between them that she’s been trying not to consider too closely because she’s pretty sure the experience wasn’t altogether unpleasant for her, or for him either, despite the fact that it really should have been, and what does that mean, exactly? Or that, really, the only reason she’s even had to do this is because *I come in peace, take me to your leader*, and that she really should have made use of the university’s discount for getting a regular therapist appointment, but it’s too late now...

Margo brings the runaway thought train to a screeching halt before it completely derails. “I was occupied elsewhere,” she says instead, and then she is slammed with a sense of profound, soul-sucking failure.

Torquemada smiles, and there’s really nothing friendly about it this time. “So I gather. Doing what, precisely?”

And at that point, Margo realizes just how much shit she’s in. At least she understands the mechanism now. It’s a simple behaviorist principle: a biochemical reward for running off at the mouth, and a punishment for even so much as withholding irrelevant details. Let alone lying — she can’t imagine the sort of psychological whiplash that outright lying would produce. And indeed, the interrogator doesn’t have to lift a finger. Her own body is, once again, her worst enemy.

It is really becoming a bad habit.

“Having sex,” she finally says. Because, really, that’s better than the expanded alternative.

Torquemada raises a quizzical eyebrow. “Ah. And who with, pray tell?”

Swallowing another nascent tirade on the technical ambiguities required to provide an accurate answer to this question, Margo limits her answer to “a mage.” And actually gets a nice warm and fuzzy reward, apparently quite visible on her face, if Torquemada’s surprised expression is anything to go by. If she really wanted to make the most of this, she’d have to say “two mages” — as the most formally accurate response. Though that might give Torquemada the wrong sort of idea...

“Interesting.” The Spymaster interlaces her fingers, but there is something speculative about her gaze. As if this was not precisely what she had expected. Or rather, as if she did not expect Margo to fess up quite so easily. Well, sorry to disappoint...

“A Tevinter mage, by chance?”

“Yes.” No reward or punishment for that one.

Torquemada considers this newly acquired information. “That you will admit this with such ease tells me one of two things. You are rightfully blaming yourself for your unforgivable dalliance with an enemy, and are in fact looking for situations that would most effectively end you. This is consistent with you defying orders, and with your choice to participate in the battle at the Temple of Sacred Ashes. And with your reckless behavior there, which, I should remind you, I witnessed first-hand. If this is the case, I can assure you that I will oblige your desire to die at the end of this conversation.”

Margo swallows the bile rising in her throat.

Torquemada pauses, steeples her fingers, and props her chin on top of them — an incongruously casual gesture. “Alternatively, you are not embarrassed by this at all. If so, then the only possible explanation is that you were using sex to try to gain an advantage — perhaps looking to gather information on the Tevinter presence on the Coast. This, of course, would be mostly in the interest of the Qunari, which brings me to my next question. Were you spying on Tevinter?”

Margo looks at Torquemada. All she can see, once again, is a grinning skull. This is it, then. The end of the road. If she says “yes,” she’ll get slammed with negative biochemical feedback, because let’s face it, Maile was not spying on anyone. She just... really had a thing for this particular robed fuckwit. So it will be a lie, and the spymaster will know.

And if she says no, then she is done.

In a split second decision, Margo jams the sharp protrusion from her manacle into the webbing between her thumb and forefinger, hoping that she can hit the pressure point without looking.

The pain is blinding. Her skin explodes in goosebumps, and tears spring to her eyes. “No,” she says through the pain, and not even the inbuilt reward mechanism of the truth serum can override her body’s shocked reaction.

Torquemada’s eyebrows shoot up. “I see,” she says and length. “So. Spying on Tevinter, but not in an official capacity. Certainly not at our behest, anyway. Are you with the Ben Hassrath?”

What happens if she says no when she doesn’t know the answer? When, in fact, she does not understand the question? Would her body interpret the statement as a lie?

“Yes,” she says, and is crushed by a wave of bleak hopelessness. So, yes. For all intents and purposes, a failure to respond accurately is always classified as a lie.

At this point Torquemada is looking genuinely confused. And then, some gear grinds into place,

because the spymaster actually beams at her. “Of course. Of course, I should have thought of this sooner. Charter has always had a ... soft spot for some of her girls. You were with her for a very long time, comparatively speaking. Perhaps you did not reciprocate and she sent you on a little vigilante mission above your paygrade and skill. Or perhaps you did reciprocate, and she promoted you before you were ready. Yet another reminder that our sentiments can blind us... but this does put things in a new light. And the Tevinter mage, presumably, beat you to the punch, as it were.” Torquemada stands up, and starts pacing. “Which can happen to the best of us, in this game. Much of this is luck and timing.” For a flicker of a second the spymaster almost looks like a reasonable person. It doesn’t last long. “And of course, your reticence to come forward... yes. Whatever happened between you and Charter, you must still be loyal to her. This is the woman who trained you. Your loyalty to her would precede any loyalty you might have for the Inquisition...”

Vassal of my vassal is not my vassal. Thank you, medieval code of honor.

Of course, this will still likely end in her throat being slit. Margo wishes she’d had the time to give Evie that pep talk. And have a beer with Varric. And learn how to process lyrium. And... Yes, alright. The elf. She’s not sure what she wants to do with him, exactly, but being out of time precludes the possibility of ever answering that question.

In the meantime, Torquemada seems to come to a decision. “One more question, agent. Do you feel responsible for the death of your patrol?”

Oh, Unspecified Creator Deity’s Hairy Scrotum, is that a trick question?

“Yes,” she says. And it’s not a lie. Maile did feel responsible. Just for a different set of reasons. And she, Margo, feels bad for them. And bad for taking over Maile’s body as the woman launched herself on a suicide mission. And kind of bad for having survived in her stead.

Her body doesn’t react.

This, apparently, seems to satisfy the spymaster.

“Under typical circumstances, I would not let this go, agent. But you have potential, and these are not typical circumstances.” She fixes Margo with her cool gaze. “You are an elf. It could not have been easy to simulate intimacy with this sort of opponent, on the slim chance that this might lend a strategic advantage. Not if we consider the history of your two people. No matter what they say, this part of the Game does not come readily for a woman. It takes true steel.” And at that moment, something awfully close to sympathy — if not compassion — flickers in the spymaster’s eyes.

Does this mean she is not going to get killed in some dank crypt?

“Very well. You will immediately cease all contacts with Charter, and you will have to pledge an oath of loyalty to me, directly. Or better yet, to the Inquisition. Do not think that I will hesitate to eliminate you at the first sign of a misstep. Do you understand me?”

Margo nods, though she really isn’t sure what she’s nodding to at this point.

“We will do this right now.”

The spymaster stands, and approaches Margo’s chair.

And then, her hands are no longer restrained.

“Repeat after me.”

And so, she repeats the oath that the spymaster enunciates to her, entirely unable to understand, let alone process its words.

“You are free to go, agent. Report to Cullen for your next assignment.”

As Margo stands up, on completely rubbery legs, and makes her way towards the stairs, Torquemada calls after her.

“I might make use of your particular talents and willingness to employ them at a later date. No sense in wasting potential that is already there.”

Oh yay. This just keeps getting better.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by verbena, classically used against insomnia, anxiety, women health issues, and as a liver tonic. In other words, pretty much exactly what poor Margo needs.

Field Season

Chapter Summary

In which Margo weaponizes snowballs, glimpses a Warden, discovers the Hinterlands, and experiences an unpleasant revelation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

By the time Margo finds Commander Rutherford, Haven feels vacant. She estimates that about a third of the troops are missing. She passes by the apothecary on her way down to the training grounds, and she is forced to walk by Solas's hut. The door is closed. She squashes the impulse to knock, and keeps on walking.

The tavern is emptied out too. The only patrons are a bard, who isn't even pretending to sing, and a couple of older soldiers, grizzled and scarred, playing some interminable game of cards and lazily sipping their ale. Margo fishes around in her pocket, and produces a few coppers. Flissa, the barmaid, sets her up with some meaty porridge and watery beer.

Once the pragmatics of feeding the body are dealt with, Margo makes her way towards the tents. The sparring grounds are depopulated as well, only the jagged crunch of melted then refrozen footprints remains of the rink's habitual occupants. She spots Cullen and Adan, seated on a pair of upturned barrels next to a particularly badly damaged log dummy. Margo stuffs her hands deep into her pockets and walks over. Does Haven ever warm up?

"Reporting for duty," she announces brightly. She gets a toothy grin from Adan and a somewhat curt nod from the commander. Rutherford looks distracted and fidgety. His tawny eyes are sunken into purplish sockets, and she notices a burst of capillaries webbing over both cheekbones.

Still, when he speaks, it is with fastidious politeness. "Glad to have you with us, agent." If he had any doubt that Margo would make it out of her little interview with Torquemada in one piece, he doesn't let on.

"You can just call me Margo," she offers.

"Yes. Margo," he acknowledges. "I see the Nightingale is sticking with 'M's for you. I suppose it makes it easier to remember."

Margo smiles noncommittally. At least he's taking her claims about her new codename at face value. She takes the opportunity to examine the military fellow more closely. In this light, the resemblance to Jake is less obvious — and she suddenly realizes that the thing that makes the two look so similar is not so much the physical appearance as the exhausted, threadbare look. She has another pang of anxiety at the thought. Her brother didn't deserve this shit either. Mourning the death — or, minimally, the disappearance — of yet another loved one. Even if Jake did always have an oddly cavalier attitude to loss — as if he expected it, more surprised when it didn't happen than when it did. What had he said when Baba passed? "There are other worlds than these, Margo." At the time, she had rolled her eyes and brought the conversation to an abrupt end with some lame excuse about having to grade papers. It had sounded like some sort of bullshit New Age

dictum, as vapid as it was unhelpful.

“You ready to get some work done, apprentice?” Adan asks, still grinning. “Your patrol is leaving tomorrow morning.”

“One moment, Adan. We can’t neglect her battle skills. I’m not sending out another underprepared operative.” Cullen looks up at her with a vaguely apologetic expression. “No offense, agent. Uh... Margo.”

Margo returns the smile. “None taken. If Master Adan can spare me for a couple of hours, a refresher course sounds good.”

After that, she’s sent off to Master Harritt for a proper set of armor. The blacksmith sizes her up with a quick critical look, and he sends off one of his apprentices to rummage in the back of the smithy for ready-made pieces. Really, she shouldn’t feel so damn giddy at the results, but the armor is amazing. Lightweight, but sturdy, it fits her comfortably, and the leather has a soft, creamy consistency that makes you want to pet it. “Nugskin,” Harritt explains, nodding at his handiwork with obvious approval. “Too light for most of our frontline troops, but I always keep some spares on hand for you sneaky, stabby types.” He smiles into his mustache. “Cheap, too. Can’t beat it.”

After that, it’s off to find the commander again. She expects to be foisted off on one of the remaining soldiers — perhaps the alarmingly steely Ser Lysette whom she spots by one of the tents — but Cullen makes some noise about needing the exercise this morning, and chooses to run her through a few drills himself. Margo doesn’t get the chance to reflect on this strange subversion of hierarchy — though perhaps the commander likes to mingle with the common troops to make himself appear more approachable. Before she knows it, he has her running through various routines. He is a reasonably patient teacher — or, rather, a distracted one — which is a good thing, because she is a thoroughly obtuse pupil.

“You’re overthinking it,” he finally breathes out, both of them winded and covered in freezing slush. Margo gets the footwork right off, but when it comes to attacking, especially with the daggers, she freezes and pulls her punches. She relies on her body to guide her through the steps — and while she gets the whole avoid opponent at all costs part, the rest of the “sneaky, stabby” stuff is an uphill battle. Cullen spends more time chasing her around the rink than engaging in actual sparring.

“It’ll come back to you with practice. The movements are all there. But...” He seems to hesitate, and Margo decides that he’s looking for a way to phrase his criticism constructively. “How are you with the bow? You might find ranged weapons easier for now, until your instincts return.”

“You aim and pull the string, right?”

He chuckles. “That’s the gist of it. What about your throwing hand?”

Hell if she knows. So they try that next, and as it turns out, she can lob things well enough — courtesy of long summers spent playing vegetable wars with the village kids, stealing the neighbors’ tomatoes and other projectile-ready produce, and winters where every school day would be followed by a merciless snowball fight to the death, or, at least, to first tears. As long as there’s a degree of separation between Margo and her target, the in-built “do no harm” mechanism doesn’t seem to kick in.

“Adan, set her up with grenades,” Cullen orders, cleaning another snowball out of his hair. By this point, Margo’s grinning deviously. The commander gives her — and the quickly solidifying snowball she’s packing in her hands — a slightly cross look. “Start with a basic set.”

Margo spends the afternoon in the apothecary, preparing small, sturdy flasks of something flammable. Adan is so pleased with this new turn of events — and with the opportunity to produce things that will blow up on impact — that he's practically dancing around. The light outside wanes, and they ignite the braziers to get enough illumination for their work.

"All right, apprentice. This is where the fun and games end. You need to learn how to work with lyrium. We need to mix magical potions to take with your team tomorrow."

Margo looks at him with interest — because even when he was working with the highly volatile oil-like stuff they've been using for grenades, none of the awed reverence was there. "So, what is it, exactly? A mineral? An oil?"

Adan simply shakes his head. "It's what makes the world go 'round, fledgling."

As they set up, he tells her about lyrium mining, and about the ways in which dwarves have been processing it for centuries — most of it a tightly guarded trade secret. About the substance's addictiveness and detrimental long-term effects. From what Margo can glean, it's both a mineral and more than a mineral. In the parameters of her own world, it's petroleum and morphine and lithium all rolled into one. A truly classical example of Plato's *pharmakon* — at once poison and remedy, boon and sacrifice.

Adan mentions the Chantry and its tight control over the lyrium trade, and Margo is finding herself nodding vigorously when she realizes that this is their way of keeping Templars — who are, from what she can understand, the local religious organization's military arm — on a short leash. And she learns about the Circles, and how mages are branded with the stuff if they step out of line. It is as if this substance is the lynchpin of this entire world, the heartbeat at the center of its many complicated arrangements.

So by the time they are donning gloves and tying on face masks, she has developed a healthy reverence for the stuff. Even when it turns out that the potion making itself is actually rather simple — take granulated processed lyrium (which, to Margo, looks a whole lot like blue Miracle-Gro water crystals), heat it in a hermetic cast-iron capsule, and then dunk the whole thing into an ice bucket to break the crystalline structure, then mix into an infusion of what else but elfroot and some fungus — she still feels like she just learned one of alchemy's greatest secrets. Like, say, making mercury ash.

"We don't granulate it ourselves, I gather?" Margo asks, once they have a neat little row of potions aligned on a shelf specially freed up for the purpose. At this point, several hours of work into it, they are both sweaty, sooty, and cranky.

"Makers' Balls, fledgling, of course not! Even not all dwarves are able to process this stuff."

Margo nods. It would be interesting to follow the commodity chain, though, and she finds herself daydreaming about mapping the lyrium trade against the history of Thedas's political conflicts.

After everything is done, Adan sends her to the back of the temple, where a makeshift bath house has been set up to keep Haven's populace reasonably clean.

"Make sure you scrub. The particles get everywhere. You don't want that stuff to absorb," he cautions.

He doesn't have to tell her twice.

She makes her way up the hill. The feeling of emptiness is eerie — Haven feels like a ghost town,

or some kind of remote monastic outpost for particularly misanthropic ascetics. By the time she makes it to the bath house — a simple, surprisingly clean and well-heated log cabin with one steam room, another one with large wooden vats that she supposes are bathtubs, and a common area for washing and mending clothes, the camp seems frozen in time.

The bath house, on the other hand, turns out to be inhabited. She surmises that this is the women's shift. There are six or seven women in there already, with one or two familiar faces. Margo collects a threadbare towel from a grumpy elf who charges her two coppers for it. She sets herself up on a bench, and begins to peel off her clothes. None of the women seem to be particularly shy about nudity, so Margo shrugs, and does as in Rome. She opts for the steam room instead of the questionably clean bathtubs. The place smells strongly of pine, wood smoke, and caustic lye soap.

She has a companion in the sauna space. The other woman is Varric-short, as in *Homo Dwarvicus* of some kind, with an elaborate hairdo that she is trying to pry apart.

When she looks up at Margo, the dwarven woman's face breaks into a grin.

"Hey! You actually really made it!"

Oh great. *Now* someone recognizes her. "I only sort of did," Margo offers tentatively. "I got pretty severely contused and..."

"I know, I know. Memory loss, they've told us. I'm Lace Harding, in case you forgot. You might not remember, but thanks for the social tips — you've been with Charter much longer, obviously, and I appreciate all the advice when she recruited me." Hair finally managed, the dwarf takes a chunk of soap and a small bucket, and she begins to scrub herself with enthusiasm.

Margo decides to follow her example.

"I'm sorry about your patrol. There's been some odd... rumor about what happened, but I'm personally glad you made it out alive."

Great. Because Margo's life was not sufficiently complicated without "odd rumors." Instead she nods, and smiles through the stinging soap. "Thank you. You're not out scouting with Charter?"

Does she remember this right? Charter is supposed to be gone for two weeks, doing whatever it is that Charter does.

"Nope. I'm better suited to the Hinterlands, since I grew up there. In fact, I just came in for the day to collect you, after we got the Herald all set up and on her way. You and I head out tomorrow, bright and early. I'm glad you were on the roster — the others... Well. We're really scraping the bottom of the barrel this time around."

Margo tries to get soap out of her hair. It's the first time she's had her host's — well, Ok, maybe she can start thinking of it as her hair by this point — unbraided, and it's a long and unmanageable mess. Next time she comes across a pair of scissors...

"What do you mean?" she asks, trying to rake the tangles out with her fingers.

"I don't so much mind the twins. Jan's a prick, of course, but when he's not trying to climb into your breeches, he's at least competent, for a disowned Orlesian lordling, anyway. But Marek and Dylant have shit for brains. And I've known two-bit mercs with more integrity."

Margo makes a face. That must be Tweedledee and Tweedledum. "Chauvinistic nug-humping dipbags," Margo offers, paraphrasing Varric. "What's not to like?"

Harding snorts. “Couldn’t have put it better myself.”

She listens as Harding describes the situation in the Hinterlands, and the more Margo hears about it, the more the whole thing sounds like the worst idea in the history of bad ideas. Not necessarily their mission, which is, relatively speaking, a fairly straightforward one. Go find some herbs. Stuff herbs in sack. Send missive to Cullen with location of whatever herbs you didn’t have room for. Set up campsite. Mix some potions.

It’s the part where Evie and the others have to cut their way through an active war zone to get to this clergy woman — whose name is apparently Mother Giselle — and who may or may not agree to come along, or help at all.

Body clean, small clothes washed and dried, and hair more or less detangled and re-braided (into a much less complicated arrangement), Margo makes her way back to the apothecary. There’s another plate of food for her — apparently, Master Adan has noticed her tendency to skip meals, and has taken it upon himself to not let his wayward pupil starve to death. After she’s done with the meal, she chews on a piece of astringent bark — hopefully not toxic — in an effort to clean her teeth.

She doesn’t remember falling asleep. And once again, no dreams trouble her.

They set out the next morning. Her team consists of Bad News — or rather Jan Bordelon, rather fortuitously named, considering his lecherous ways — the Tweedles, and the Twins, who turn out to be two very scarred, very scary wardrobe-sized blokes with a Scottish brogue so thick you could slather it on toast.

The Twins, Margo decides, are the best thing since sliced bread. As Tweedledum starts on his misogynist speciest needling sometime by mid-morning, one of the two men — either Sheldon or Shelby, she’s not sure which is which — emits a long string of ear-curling obscenities about the moral character of Tweedle’s mother, and then proceeds to sock the loudmouth in the ear with a cannonball-sized fist. As it turns out, the Twins were adopted by a couple of wealthy dwarven merchants, and their nurse-maid was an elven woman. After that, there are no more commentaries about ears, asses, tits, or any specific species’ willingness to do it for three coppers and a bowl of mashed turnips.

As they travel down the mountain and along the valley, the climate changes radically, and by evening they are sweaty and peeling off as many layers of armor as is safe. They manage to avoid trouble — which surprises Margo quite a bit, based on Harding’s stories — but the scout mentions that the detour allows them to skirt most of the dangerous areas. The first few times they camp, Margo is so exhausted from the punishing pace of their travels that she falls asleep the second her head hits the bedroll.

On the fourth day, they stop for the night next to the expanse of a lake, the evening breeze blowing pleasantly cool air off the water. Margo wanders along the pebbly shore, and discovers that the place is overgrown with blood lotus. Since the Tweedles are managing the campfire, the Twins are setting up tents, and Harding is off to hunt for dinner, she decides to recruit Jan for some herb collection. He stretches demonstratively from his task of chopping wood, showing off broad, tanned shoulders and a trim waste, and follows along happily enough, a smirk on his lips.

Bad News’s amorous enthusiasm gets somewhat dampened by the chore of stuffing plants in a sack. “So,” he trails, sometimes after the third burlap bag is filled with reeds. “Got anyone to warm your bedroll at night?”

Yep. One-track mind, that one.

Margo tells him to fuck off. He laughs fairly goodnaturedly. “Tsk, tsk. Shame to waste such beauty, lass. Wouldn’t want to see you... ahm.. Wilt on the vine, hmm? Let me know when you change your mind, lovely.”

“You’ll be the first to know,” Margo grumbles, and then they both freeze. They’ve rounded a bend in the shoreline, and there is movement in the small ravine ahead. Jan docks behind a boulder, and Margo follows him, with a brief lag. What the hell is that thing? For a second, she could have sworn she saw a kind of orange, glowing goat.

Further scrutiny reveals that it’s a couple of unaccommodating looking fellas with bows and very anonymizing head-gear. The kind of head-gear you’d want to use if you would rather that the travelers you’re robbing not identify you in a line-up later.

She is about to ask Bad News whether they should sneak back to get reinforcements when a commotion draws their attention, and they both peek out from behind their shelter to get a better look.

A small group of men — or, boys, really — burst forth from behind a fjord, and charge at the two presumed brigands with screams that are probably meant to be awe-inspiring, but come off as rather the opposite. But that’s not what has Margo gawking. They are led by what appears to be a very heavily armored bear. Except said bear is also brandishing a sword and a shield, and is moving with distinctly non-bear like lethal speed.

The boys mostly provide vocal accompaniment, but the bear is all business. He knocks one of the archers off his feet with a shield strike. Before brigand number one gets a chance to so much as draw his bow, let alone fire, the bear pivots around with a promptness that defies the basic laws of physics, and lops the head of brigand number two — now charging at his ursine assailant with a dagger — clean off his shoulders. Then the dread bear turns around again — all part of the same fluid movement — and plants his sword in the supine shape of brigand number one. As he does, his armor catches the waning evening light, and Margo notices a strange design on his breastplate — something with wings, she thinks.

“Andraste’s Blessed Knickers, that’s a Grey Warden,” Jan whispers next to her. By his tone, he might as well have said “Purple Unicorn.”

Margo squints against the glare of the setting sun, trying to see what this apparently mythical creature looks like. Maybe Grey Wardens are some kind of werebear species? But... no. From this angle, the bloke looks human enough. It’s just that he has truly spectacular facial hair. And, based on his size, he might even give the Twins a run for their money.

Carnage all done with, the mysterious warrior trails back to the group of boys, who are chattering excitedly at each other. She can’t hear what he’s trying to impart on his small flock of followers, but she suspects it’s some kind of pep talk. And then, before they can really do anything about it, he gathers his things and marches away towards the hills.

Margo shoots Jan a confused look. “What do you figure he’s doing?” Really, unless this is some kind of performance art...

Bad News shrugs. “Recruiting, I guess. Can’t see what else a Warden would be doing in this region. Either way, Harding needs to know about it. Best notify headquarters.”

They trail back to the camp — burlap sacks in tow. By the time they make it back, Scout Harding

has returned, and is gutting something that looks like a goat, or a ram.

“A Grey Warden. Are you sure?” she asks — at least twice — after they relay their intel. “I’ll contact the spymaster.” The small woman whistles, and a raven-like bird with some kind of reddish plumage around its throat — alights on her outstretched hand.

Dinner finished, the Twins and the Tweedles start a game of cards — something called Wicked Grace, which, from what Margo can surmise, is somewhere in between poker and bridge. Margo decides to beg off.

“Aren’t you cold, lovely? Want some company?” Jan tries again.

“No.”

“Ah, well. Next time, then.”

She’s asleep almost as soon as she curls into her bedroll.

When she opens her eyes, Margo realizes immediately that she is dreaming. The chartreuse quality of the light reminds her too much of that first night with Brother Rufus’s thrice-bedamned manuscript. But the landscape is not the non-Euclidean mind-bending horror of her transuniversal travel, but something much more familiar. A soft, fragrant, quiet field of tall summer grasses, speckled with bright splashes of color — poppies and knapweed, yarrow and chamomile...

She turns around, and there, next to her, is her Baba, digging up an early-purple orchid with a neat little rake, and gently cleaning the clumps of earth from the bulb.

“Ah, my soul, you have finally come,” Baba comments without lifting her head from her work.

Margo doesn’t dare to move, lest the vision dissipates. She extends her hand tentatively, and puts it on Baba’s forearm. It’s solid. And then tears well up in her eyes, and she throws her arms around the old woman and nestles up into her embrace with a relieved hiccupy sob.

“Shh, *lelkem* . Do not fret. There’s no helping what’s done.”

They sit like that for a few moments. Baba gently brushes Margo's hair with her earth-covered fingers.

“Baba, I think I got lost,” Margo finally manages.

Her grandmother turns, her slate grey eyes mild. “You can’t find yourself without getting a little lost on the way, my heart. ”The old woman’s face crinkles into a sad smile. “But you’re not here for your old Baba, are you my little thistle? You’re here for the wolfling.”

Margo frowns, but in the logic of the dream, Baba’s words, however nonsensical, ring true, a truth she feels down to her very bones.

“I don’t understand,” Margo pleads.

Baba chuckles. “All the other children, they always wanted the treats. The juicy currants, and the sweet frost apples, and the candied cloudberryes. But you, I could never keep you away from the bitter roots.” She cackles softly, entertained by the memory. “There you’d sit, gnawing at the darn things — who knows where you’d even find them — your little face all puckered up with the taste of it. But you’d just keep at it. Stubborn little thistle.”

The old woman's expression turns serious, and she tucks a stray salt and pepper lock under her kerchief. "Fate's not a dog, child, you can't chase it away with a stick." And there is steel in Baba's voice, just as Margo remembers it. Baba rarely scolded, but never coddled.

"Baba, help me find my way. I don't know what I'm doing."

"Wish that I could, my soul." The old woman gets up, tucks the bulb into a pocket, and brushes twigs and leaves off her apron. "If you want to see him, best go soon. There's not much time left."

And with that, Baba scoops her into a last hug, plants a kiss on Margo's forehead — licorice and lemon balm and bitter wormwood, and home as nothing else will ever be — and vanishes into thin air.

Margo looks around, trying, and failing, to keep the tears at bay. She begins to walk down the field's gentle slope, and as she does, the grass seems to dry out and fade away, and soon she is walking through a thin dusting of snow. The air turns dry and bitter cold, and before long, she is shivering.

There is a copse of short craggy trees, gnarled with the elements, and she trudges towards it, hoping at this point that she would wake up already, because she doesn't need to also dream of cold when there's plenty of that when she's awake.

She turns her head, and freezes. She is no longer alone.

"Is this your dream?" she asks the familiar elf. "Or mine?"

"It is difficult to say." Solas looks at the sky, a small smile on his face, and then turns his gaze towards her. "Somewhere halfway, I would imagine. I am glad you found your way here. And that you are in one piece."

"Are you all right? The four of you?" She tries to keep her voice neutral, but doesn't quite manage.

His expression turns troubled. "We are alive, for now. Though for how long, I cannot say."

"Did you run into trouble?" Not that she could swoop in to the rescue. It's not like she can fight.

"It is more that trouble seems to find us, with enviable regularity." He looks at the sky again, and his forehead creases into a frown. "I must go soon."

Margo hesitates, then she briefly brushes her fingers against the sleeve of his forearm. "Solas, wait. I need to ask you something."

Another smile, and there is really something so gentle about him here, as if all the hard edges and brittleness is smoothed over by the dreamworld's soft currents.

How does she do this? But it seems important that she know. "I passed my alchemy... entrance exams. But..."

The elf's smile widens — and, of course, the warm fuzzies don't miss their opportunity to strike — but his expression remains quizzical. Well, as far as she's concerned, warm fuzzies beat incoherent lust any day. She'll take it.

"What troubles you, lethallan?"

Her mind glosses over the unfamiliar moniker. No point in beating about the bush, right? Better

just rip the band-aid right off. “Enchanter Minaeve and Master Adan had me make a particular formula. Its effects, while not lethal, were, for lack of a better word, odd.” She exhales, finding words to continue. “It created a very localized sort of hallucination that seemed... incredibly real. Are you familiar with anything like that?”

Solas looks at her thoughtfully. But Margo also realizes that there is no sparkle of recognition, or humor, or playfulness to his response. Polite, even friendly, interest, yes. But nothing that would suggest that he would know what she is talking about.

Her blood turns to ice.

“I imagine that any number of draughts would be able to create some manner of illusion, especially if they work to thin the Veil between the Fade and the waking world. What was specific to the one you imbibed?”

She should tell him. If she’s going to ask him for advice, then really, she should just bite the bullet and stop acting like a teenager with a crush. They’re all adults here, right? She’s too old for this shit. And really, so is he. “It... manifested someone... hmm... familiar. Except the hallucination’s behavior was...” Oh she’s such a chicken. “A bit out of character, I suppose. Plausible, perhaps, but not entirely.”

Solas peers at her, as if he is trying to figure out what’s hiding behind the words. “This figure from your vision, what did it do?”

Margo squirms under the elf’s gaze. “Well. The draught...” Oh, to hell with it, she’s being a brat about this. “Look, the draught was an aphrodisiac.” She watches his eyes widen. She’s actually a little bit disappointed that elven ears don’t reflect emotional states. She keeps expecting them to do a kind of Yoda number when they go up in surprise or excitement. “So, as you can imagine, while it is in full swing, you end up with a rather one-track mind. That’s really what makes it so challenging, it’s hard to do any work when you’re...” she trails off. Her cheeks are burning hot.

“Ah.” He pauses, and his expression is... impish. “I can certainly see how this could interfere with one’s focus. And, may I ask who the familiar figure in your vision was?”

Well, wouldn’t you like to know. She narrows her eyes at him. “Not important at the moment,” she answers tersely. “The important thing is that I’m trying to work out if it was only a hallucination, or something else.”

“That you would think to ask this suggests that this is someone you are reasonably certain you might encounter in the Fade.” Oh, and he sounds so carefully neutral about it, too. “Out of curiosity, what was the name of the formula?”

Margo shrugs. “Something like Ishmael’s Bargain, if I recall correctly.”

Solas stills, his face suddenly deadly serious. “*Imshael’s* Bargain? Are you quite certain?”

Ishmael, Imshael... Margo frowns. Whatever he is worried about, she doubts it’s the environmental consequences of whaling. This is going to be more bad news, isn’t it?

The elf’s hands suddenly come up, fingers curling in an almost painful grip around her arms, and he pivots her to face him. She finds herself tangled up in his gaze.

“Margo.” Her name on his lips sends a jolt down her spine. It’s... like an alchemist, tasting an unfamiliar plant for its properties. “Please. You must listen. This... vision, did it endeavor to offer you anything? A favor? A boon, perhaps?”

She shakes her head, suddenly numb. “Not quite. I suppose it offered... help. I turned it down.”

“And it did not insist?” he presses.

“It didn’t force itself on me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Solas’s grip on her relaxes, and then, a second of hesitation, and his hands come up to cup her face. He tilts her head up, his eyes searching for some kind of answer, though Margo at this point feels a little iffy about what the whole conversation was about in the first place.

“Who was in the vision, da’ nas? You must tell me. I cannot help you if I do not know for sure what shape the Forbidden One took for you.”

The Forbidden One? What in the ever loving fuck is a Forbidden One? With a name like that, nothing good, no doubt.

“You,” she finally says.

At that, the elf pulls back from her as if scalded. He turns around and paces, eyebrows drawn in simmering anger. “How can these imbeciles not have thought this through? Children, playing with forces they cannot begin to comprehend... Whose idea was it, this draught?”

Margo takes hold of his forearm, and forces him to a stop. His random oscillations are making her a little dizzy, and it’s becoming increasingly difficult to keep the dream in place and prevent it from sort of... drifting away, like a soap bubble.

“For what it’s worth, I don’t think they were intentionally malicious. It sounded like it’s not an uncommon draught to use as a test.”

Solas is practically vibrating with irritation. “If so, then it is selected solely for the perverse amusement of the examiner, and with no consideration for potential consequences.”

He is about to start pacing again, so Margo grips his arm more firmly. “Solas, hold on. This Forbidden One... Varric told me about something called desire demons. Is that the same category of thing?”

The elf nods. “That is one name for them, though the label oversimplifies the matter. Imshael is a very ancient one of its kind.”

“But shouldn’t it count for something that, in the end, nothing happened? I didn’t turn into a drooling husk, or anything.”

“That they would trifle with such a thing is offense enough!” Again, that hot flash of anger. “It was pure luck that the demon miscalculated, and took the wrong shape.”

If Margo didn’t know any better, she’d have to say he sounds just a pinch... ambivalent about that.

“It...” She looks at him a bit more carefully then. There’s still that worried crease between his eyebrows, but there’s something else there, too, something almost wistful, and yet resigned, and the combination makes him look... vulnerable. She’s pretty sure that in the waking world, it would have been buried under layers of careful shields.

She stares at the copse of trees, because at that moment, she can’t quite bring herself to meet his gaze. “I wouldn’t say it miscalculated in that sense. It made an... educated guess.”

She takes a quick look. Solas's eyebrows are raised in surprise, a dusting of sudden color on his cheeks. But he's still looking pretty thunderous about the whole thing. " *That...* is unwise, lethallan. Although perhaps it misjudged you, which is... Somewhat reassuring. In either event, we cannot exclude the possibility that it will try again, with a better 'educated guess' next time."

Margo frowns. "Even if I stay away from any similar formulas?"

"You cannot avoid sleeping. Your body and your spirit are mismatched. They make the Veil grow thin, and thus attract attention. And your spirit... stands out. You are quite easy to locate in the Fade — I did not have to look for long before I came upon you. It means that others will as well."

So he has been looking for her? Ah. "You still have my memories. Perhaps by integrating them, I can... reattach to this body more firmly. Become less noticeable."

He nods. "Perhaps. In any event, for lack of a more obvious solution, we should do this as soon as we are able." He seems to hesitate, and then his expression hardens. "Lethallan, our association, whatever its nature, is proving... problematic. I would not..." He trails off.

Margo braces herself for what is likely going to come next, except that Solas suddenly looks off into the distance, and then his face contorts in a grimace of pain. "There is no time. If you are in the Hinterlands, come find us if you can. We may require assistance."

Margo wakes up with a gasp, the contours of his face, distorted by some invisible anguish, like a retina burn on the back of her eyelids.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by calcination, a process where an ore or other solid material is heated in order to break down its molecular structure to make it suitable for medicine making. Widely used in different alchemical and medical traditions, notably with the infamous mercury ash.

Translations: *lelkem n.* (Hungarian) Literally "my soul," figuratively, a term of endearment, like "darling" or "dear one." From *lélek* (soul) + *-em* (possessive suffix). *da'nas* -- Something like "little soul" in what we presume might be Elvhen. ;)

Next up: Trouble. Lots and lots of trouble. And also, learning more about Evie.

Singularity

Chapter Summary

In which Margo discovers rifts

Chapter Notes

Please be advised that this chapter ends on a cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It takes Margo a few seconds to shake off the torpor of sleep, but when she finally does, the adrenaline propels her forward, ahead of any coherent thought. She crawls out of the tent she was sharing with Harding, gripped by a generalized, unfocused panic. It's not dawn yet, but it's getting close — the unfamiliar stars have paled, and a narrow band of fuschia pools along the horizon.

All of her bandmates are sound asleep, safe for Marek, on guard duty.

“Finally, you're up. Lazy fucking elves,” he greets her. Of course, it couldn't have been Harding, or the Twins, or even Jan. It just had to be one of the Tweedles. This will be an uphill battle.

“Listen, I think the Herald needs assistance. We need to try to find them.”

The goon stares at her, and then he twirls his index finger next to his temple in the multiversal gesture for “crazy.”

“Did you hit your head again, rabbit? First, how in the Void would you know that — you've been out like a log for the last six hours. Besides, don't rightly know where they are, do we now?”

Margo looks at him in helpless frustration. How the hell is she supposed to convince this dimwitted asshat — who is already not predisposed to listen to anything she might have to say on account of deeply held ideological convictions about both elves and women — when all she's got to go on is a dream. As much as she hates to admit this, the douchenozzle is right — she doesn't have the slightest idea about where Evie and the others might be.

“Seeing how you're awake and all, make yourself useful and take over. Gonna get me some shut-eye,” Marek announces, and lumbers off towards one of the tents. She can hear the thunderous snoring of the twins emanating from there, but the Tweedle is undeterred by the noise.

By that point, Margo is frenetic with the need to do something. Anything. Anything but this stupid, helpless wasting of time.

She gives up on the goon, crawls back into her own tent, and locates Harding's sleeping shape in the darkness. She's about to shake the dwarven woman awake, but before she can so much as reach for her, the scout sits up — dagger in hand, and an iron grip on Margo's wrist.

“I think the Herald is in trouble,” Margo whispers, ignoring both blade and Harding's hold on her.

“Pardon the rude awakening,” she adds, and hopes that Lace Harding is genuinely awake, and not running through a somnambulist subroutine that will end with Margo missing fingers.

“When did the raven come in?” the scout asks, and, to Margo’s relief, the voice sounds alert. It takes her a second to realize that Harding is assuming that the news has been obtained through the local avian delivery service.

She doesn’t see much choice but to exploit whatever goodwill Maile might have built up with the dwarf.

“It didn’t,” she says. “I saw it in the Fade.” Here is to hoping that Varric is right, and that all things Fade-related are outside of dwarves’ jurisdiction or propensity to debate.

Harding, bless her, takes this questionable announcement in stride. She nods once before pulling on her boots and leathers. “Did you get a sense of their location?” she asks, businesslike.

“Not really.” Another wave of helpless frustration. How the hell are they supposed to look for them, when she has no idea — not even an inkling — of where they might be. For all she knows, the Hinterlands are the size of a small European country. Her understanding of the scale of Thedas is rudimentary verging on nonexistent.

Margo closes her eyes, forcing herself to recall the details of the dream. There was that copse of scraggly trees, but how many scraggly trees might there be in these mountains?

Then, it hits her. Solas kept looking at the sky — she never questioned what had drawn his attention, but the answer should be pretty obvious — there was a greenish glow on his face. And what’s big, ugly, green, and swirls like shit down a toilet? She hasn’t spotted Hellmouth from their location yet, because, of course, they are much further away from Haven — but it should still be visible from some angles, shouldn’t it?

Margo follows the scout out of the tent. “Lace, are there many places around here that you can see the Breach from?” she asks, hoping against hope that the answer will be a handy “*oh, really, just that one specific spot at XY coordinates.*”

She should be so lucky.

Harding reflects for a few seconds, then she shakes her head, and Margo’s heart sinks. “You can’t see much from this side of the range, the mountains are in the way. Did you notice anything else? Any other markers that might help me track? Trees, mountain profile, plants? Structures?”

A field of wilted grass and a copse of battered trees isn’t much to go by... At this point, Margo is practically howling with frustrated desperation and forced idleness, but she pushes down the instinct to simply start running in a random direction. “There were distinct craggy trees there — I remember thinking how weather-beaten they looked. And... a greenish glow from above. That’s why I thought this might be somewhere where the Breach is visible.”

Harding sniffs, absorbed by her topographic calculations. “Maybe not the Breach. But it could be the glow of a rift. In fact, that’s more likely. Trouble is, we’ve located a few in this area. Though there is that one right between here and the refugee camp. If they decided to cut across, as the bird flies...” The scout nods. “I don’t remember whether there are craggy trees there, but there is an old ruin. If they came upon it at night and decided to camp nearby, it is possible they wouldn’t have noticed the rift on the other side.”

Margo exhales through her teeth, feeling every bit like an overheated pressure cooker with a

broken valve. This is such a stretch. Even Harding must know this is a fairly flimsy guesstimate, but what can they do, really? It's that, or simply shrugging it off. Or running off at random, hoping that somehow the universe's benevolence will lead them to the right location. Unlikely, that. So far, the universe isn't proving particularly benevolent.

In the meantime, Harding seems to come to a decision. "I don't want to leave the camp abandoned, in case they manage to make it up here, and need some help. I say we leave the twins and the other two, take Jan, and go take a look at that rift."

Margo is already nodding, rushing off to wake up the soldier. Jan blinks sleep out of his eyes and makes a grab at her hips, trying to pull her on top of him. Margo bats his hands off, but before she gets the chance to knee him in the groin, Harding barks out the new orders in a tone that brooks no argument, lest there be consequences. Once he shelves his lecherous intentions, Bad News is on his feet, armed, and ready much quicker than Margo's able to get her grenade belt and daggers. She stuffs as many ampules as she can — health potions, magical restoratives, and explosives — into the leather vial holder, and then she breaks into a run after the retreating figures of her two companions.

She can't quite estimate how long it takes them to get in view of the green, shimmering thing hanging in mid-air at the foot of a broken bridge. They run the whole time, though Harding eventually makes a gesture with her fist, and slows them down to a swift jog, favoring stealth over speed. Margo can see the chartreuse glow before they come upon its source — the "rift," as Harding called it. It looks like someone dropped a giant, fluorescent green egg yolk into a pot of cold water. *I do not like green eggs and ham*, Margo mouths with a hysterical snigger. *Not with a goat, not on a boat...* The thing — and there is something so fundamentally, viscerally perverse about it — pulses and morphs, like some disgusting life form.

The rift is ringed by beings that defy the imagination. Margo assumes this is what "demons" are — they certainly look the part. Whatever their nature, they are certainly not human, by whatever definition one might use. There are translucent phosphorescing formations — vaguely humanoid, sure, but only in the most abstract sense of the term. They are positioned in a loose circle around the hell-yolk. Their soft puke-green glow illuminates the other denizens, and Margo's brain strains to make sense of what she is seeing. "What the fuck is *that*?" she squeaks, before she can catch herself. Jan, next to her, cuts her a sardonic look, but even he looks vaguely sickened. He points his chin towards the creatures her eyes are fixated on. "Shades," he supplies quietly. "First time, lass?" Margo has to stop herself from shaking her head to dislodge the nonsensical vision. The entities look and move like remarkably muscular, wiry slugs in the throes of a bad case of mummification — except they have multi-jointed arm-like appendages, truly spectacular claws, and for some reason they are wearing tattered little hoods that might be clothing, or might be a part of their body.

Margo peels her gaze from the necro-slugs. She spots them, then, on the other side of the broken bridge, using the ruins of the old fort as cover. She squints against the glare of the hell-yolk. The closest one is Cassandra — the edge of her shield is visible behind the loose masonry of the crumbling rampart. Varric is next — further back, behind a large slab of stone. Judging by his movements, he is reloading the crossbow. Back behind Varric, she spots the other two as well — Evie and Solas are partially obscured from view by a fallen column, but the tops of their heads are still visible from Margo's elevated vantage point. Solas is slumped against the column. The faintly flickering blue of what Margo assumes is the same barrier spell he cast around them when they were fleeing from the wolves surrounds both him and Evie. Even from this distance, the elf's posture suggests either extreme exhaustion or some physical damage. Evie is completely immobile — either frozen by fear, or unconscious.

Margo swallows around the frantic heartbeat in her throat. Harding crawls past her and gestures for

them to get a move-on, breaking through Margo's paralysis. The three of them hide behind the fallen tree trunk, using it to stop their slide down the gravelly slope into the ring of otherworldly fauna.

"All right," Harding whispers. "They're trapped in there. We need to give them a chance to break out. Maile-... I mean, Margo." The scout shakes her head with a slight frown. "I'll get this straight eventually... Hit the circle with a couple of grenades, on opposite quadrants, here, and here." She gestures with a gloved hand. "That will draw the lot of them this way once they figure out where we're pummeling them from, but it should give me and Jan time to get in position. I will try to put down as many wisps as I can at long range. Jan, go around and draw in a few shades your way. Margo, once you see an opening, go on the other side, here, while Jan is giving the bastards a little exercise. I'll cover. Do not tangle with them, are we clear? Go straight into the fort, and get the others back on their feet. You have enough potions?"

Margo nods through chattering teeth. Harding exhales. "Oof. Maker willing, there won't be another wave. Is everyone ready?"

Jan grins, his teeth a stark white against his tanned skin. "Let's send the spongy bastards back to the Void, ladies."

Harding scowls. "No heroics, Bordelon. Keep it simple. You start getting overwhelmed, you shadow out of there. Margo?"

Hell in a sack. Just like hurling tomatoes at that thieving little shit Mihal from two houses over, right? No biggie. Margo extracts two ampules out of her belt, her fingers shaking so badly she almost drops one of them. And then she stands up as quietly as she can. Just like tomatoes. *Dögölj meg*, you bastards. She braces one knee against the tree trunk, holds her breath, and she lobbs the grenades — two underhand throws in quick succession — at each side of the circle. The explosions are a second or two apart, and the blasts slap her with a heat wave before she has the time to fall back behind the trunk again.

Harding is already gone, running along the slope for a better firing position. There's a succession of sharp, whistling sounds to Margo's left, and she watches as one, then two of the humanoid floaters flicker out of existence with a puff of green smoke, like a cloud of spores. The third shot misses, and the arrow embeds into the grass below with juicy "thwack." The circle shifts formation, and the demons start making their way in Margo's general direction. The necro-slugs are making extremely unpleasant noises that put her in mind of huge metal plates, grating at the bottom of a mine shaft.

While the creatures are still deciding where to go, Margo throws one more grenade into the thickest cluster of the unpleasant things. This time, she ducks in time to avoid the heat wave. Wherever Jan is, he is no longer behind the log.

"We are here," she hears the Seeker's clear, sharply accented voice ring out through the clearing. "We cannot move out!"

Margo climbs over the log and makes her way down the slope, giving the milling cluster of demons as wide a berth as she can. Right. No tangling. No tangling sounds like a really fantastic fucking idea.

Bad News materializes as if he stepped out of a shadow on the other side of the cluster. He attacks one of the slugs with quick, economical strikes, his daggers catching the glow of the rift above. If she had any concerns that the rogue would be a show off, considering his general character, they are quickly dissipated. He's lethally efficient, like someone who learned to fight in the streets. No

frills, pure pragmatics.

Margo is running along the outer perimeter of the green glow, when the ground gives out under her — she doesn't notice the drop into the ravine until it is too late. She slides down the pebbly flank with a surprised yelp and a curse. It's enough to attract the attention of two floaters who turn their smudged, shimmering faces her way. Before she can scramble for shelter, they spit some kind of substance — the word that comes to her mind is *ectoplasm* — in her general direction. Margo drops to her stomach at the bottom of the ravine, and the shit floats by overhead.

She's on her feet again, scrambling up the other side, trying to keep her mind focused entirely on making it through the breach in the wall.

She almost makes it into the fort's perimeter when out of the corner of her eye Margo spots another one of those floating ectoplasmic emissions hurling in her direction. Still, she's not on its trajectory — a quick estimate suggests that it's aimed at the column, but as long as Solas and Evie don't come out from behind it, they should be just fine. Margo keeps running along her chosen vector towards Cassandra. Except the thrice-bedamned spectral ejaculation changes its mind mid-flight. Margo feels, more than sees, the projectile careen off its course at an angle that should not be possible. And then it slams into her back, square between the shoulderblades.

For a second, it feels like she's a sock being turned inside out and then folded into itself like a doughnut. She crumples to the ground, blood bursting from her nose in a coppery spray that clogs her throat and sinuses. She retches it out, coughing spastically until she can breathe again, but somehow she manages to get back on her feet. A second round of ectoplasmic junk floats at her with a subsonic keen, and she rolls out of the way, hitting her shoulder on the wall with a sickening jolt. The otherworldly sputum splatters against the stones, covering her in a film of spore-like particles that stink of rotting fish.

Fucking hell, but these things are vile.

Then someone drags her by the armpits further into the shelter of the ruined wall.

"Are you all right, agent?" Cassandra's face float into view, and Margo forces herself into a vertical position, finally coming into an awkward crouch next to the Seeker. Her stomach is still trying to expulse its contents, and Margo has a passing thought that it would be nice if the impending vomit would miss the Seeker.

There's a reason she's here, right? Flasks. Yes.

She casts a quick glance at the opening in the wall, but whatever demons are trying to come through are being discouraged by a combination of Varric's fire and Harding's arrows. Margo frowns. Something is not quite right. Varric's bolts are not flying straight. Not at all, in fact. They seem to be launching off well enough, but then their trajectory changes mid-flight, and they hit everything but their intended target.

She turns to Cassandra for confirmation. "Am I seeing this right?"

The Seeker's eyes, dark in the shadow of the crumbling tower, are rimmed with an exhausted, sickly purple. "Yes. This... This has been happening since the beginning, but it's been getting... far worse."

What the actual fuck is with the physics around here?

"Please tell me you have healing potions with you."

The question returns Margo's attention from the misbehaving arrows. She digs for a tonic — because really, that is one thing she *can* do — and slams two potions into Cassandra's hand. One “healing,” and one “restorative,” according to Adan's terminology — which, in Margo's humble opinion, is just the difference between quick and timed release formulas.

“Can you still fight?” she asks. Cassandra is already downing one of the draughts.

“Yes. See if you can tend to the others. Varric is fine, though he has somehow managed to sprain his ankle.” The degree of exasperated frustration at this revelation makes Margo think that Cassandra's probably going to be just fine. “Solas may need assistance.”

Margo nods. “And Lady Trevelyan?”

“Frightened, but unscathed, as far as I can tell.” The words are delivered rather dryly.

Once Varric has stopped to reload, Margo crawls towards him, trying to not get caught by another ectoplasmic projectile. She really doesn't want to risk the anarchic arrows — based on their behavior, they seem perfectly capable of turning around and deciding that her ass would make for a suitable pin cushion. When she reaches the dwarf, he looks up, a wry twist to his mouth. “Well, Prickly, you're a sight for sore eyes.”

Margo hands him his allocated potions. “How the hell did this happen? Scratch that. Is Bianca feeling alright?”

Varric shakes his head, pointing a gloved finger towards the breach in the wall. “It's not just my bolts. Take a look.”

Margo follows the dwarf's gaze. Cassandra steps out from behind her shelter, shield raised before her to meet one of the hooded necro-slugs propelling itself through the opening. The Seeker lifts her sword to strike a blow — and it looks like it's going to be a very nice blow, all sorts of accurately lethal — except that the warrior's heel catches on a loose rock at a critical moment, and she stumbles. The strike barely grazes the demon's shoulder.

The necro-slug screeches its metallic war cry.

Varric aims Bianca and fires. The bolt actually flies true this time, and hits the slug in the abdominal area — if the thing has an abdomen, that is. It screeches some more — pissed off about the arrow in its gut, no doubt — and it retreats back out through the breach.

“See, I count now. I can get approximately every fifth bolt to hit something I actually would like it to hit.”

Margo frowns. So... not just physics that's being distorted, but...

Before she can finish the thought the dwarf puts a hand on her shoulder.

“You need to make it to Chuckles. He's taken a bit too much damage when they first fell on us. You're packing magica potions, yes?”

She nods, and she gets to her feet. Her body is numb with adrenaline, even the pain in her shoulder a muted distraction. It's not far to the column — five, six yards at most — and Margo covers the distance easily enough. She is a few paces away when her foot gets caught in a crack in the stones, and she crashes into the column with a loud, crunchy smack on top of the previous shoulder injury. Pain shoots through he left arm and into her clavicle.

She forces herself to crawl over the column, and she collapses into a heap on the other side. Through the pain, she has a stark vision of Evie, her face smeared with dirt and tears. On the other side of the kid, Solas, pale as a ghost, his profile illuminated by the dull glow of whatever magic he's still managing to maintain, doesn't look up. His head rests against the column's stone, his eyes closed, features gaunt and sharp in the ethereal gleam, and Margo has trouble believing that only a day passed since she's last seen him.

"M- M- Margo! Oh thank Andraste you're here!" Evie hiccups.

"Are you ok, kiddo?" She tries to see if Evie is injured, but the kid looks largely in one piece. Margo pulls out a potion from her holder and downs it in a few gulps. She can afford *one*. The rest will have to go to the others.

The pain subsides.

"I- I'm fine. Please help Solas! There was this big demon, and it came out of nowhere, and then Solas tried to put a barrier and freeze it in place, but then somehow that didn't work quite right, and then..."

Solas opens his eyes and looks at Margo, grey gaze dulled with pain. "You cannot remain here, lethallan. You must get away at once. It is not safe."

"I can damn well see it's not safe!" Margo announces acerbically, because at this point meeting the universe's endless capacity to generate clusterfucks with generalized bitchiness seems vastly preferable to incoherent panic. She gets three more ampules out of her belt — her arm does not miss the opportunity to scream in protest. Potions in hand, she crawls over to the elf, trying not to drop anything. She does, in fact, drop one ampule — it feels like it jumps right out of her hand — but she is able to locate it just as she's about to crush it with her knee.

Once she's wedged between Solas and Evie, Margo gives the elf a critical once-over. Well. She's not a doctor. But this much blood on the outside is probably not a good thing. She pries one of the flasks open — the quick release formula — and she puts her hand at the back of Solas's neck to tilt his head up. He doesn't struggle against her touch, or bat away her hands with some bullshit attempt at "I'm fine," so there's that. She empties the tonic into his mouth and she watches his throat work as he swallows the liquid. Atta elf.

When Solas's eyes open again, they are less clouded, and Margo decides to file that away as a win. Team — One, Universe — (which is revealing itself to be a cheating asshole anyway) — Zero.

She passes him the lyrium potion, and he unstoppers it with unsteady fingers, draining it in one draw. The bluish glow gets marginally brighter.

"The only way we might yet survive this is for the Herald to use her mark on the rift," he says, voice deceptively calm, expression stony. Margo has a feeling she is coming in on the tail-end of an ongoing argument, and that she has missed all the best parts.

She takes a look at Evie. The kid is shaking like a leaf. "I can't. I'm so sorry, I can't! I am trying, but I can't, please, please don't make me come near that thing! I can't do it..."

So, the kid is in shock and terrified out of her wits. Of course she is. Who the fuck asks someone to go wave their hand at a fluorescent hell-yolk that spits out primordial horrors? "Evie, hun, listen to me. How far do you need to be for this to work?"

Evie is still shaking her head in denial. "No, no, no, please, I can't, I really can't, I'm trying, but I

can't, it hurts when I try, and..."

"Sure you can, kid. We're going to go together, deal?"

"You cannot!" Solas's hand shoots out and crushes Margo's wrist in a steely grip that shouldn't be quite so firm considering that a minute ago he was fading. "You will get yourself killed." Neither a warning, nor a threat, but a statement of fact.

"Probably, but maybe not today," Margo opines, with cheerfulness she does not feel at all. "Evie, how far from the rift do you need to be to close it?"

"Five or six yards, I think, but I'm not sure, because I've never had a chance to test it without demons there, because there are always these demons around and they're really not very helpful if you want to figure out how far out it works, and..."

Margo nods, and begins to extricate herself from Solas's hold on her wrist. He does not immediately let go.

"Here's what we're going to do. We'll let Cassandra and Varric distract the demons — they don't actually have to kill them, just keep them entertained. Solas, do you have enough magic to cover us?"

Solas shakes his head. "The only spell I am reliably able to cast is barrier. Everything else is..." he makes a little gesture with his hand that, to Margo, seems to indicate something like "hocus pocus." He shifts, leaning on his staff to maneuver himself into a crouch. "There must be old magics in this fort that are interfering with my focus, although I cannot quite understand their nature."

But didn't Cassandra say something about their team's mysterious incompetence going on for longer than this particular predicament? Something about it becoming worse over time?

Whatever might be the case, they do not have time for idle speculation about the wonky physics, or what's impeding on Solas's magic. The point is to get Evie out of the way of the demons, and close enough to the hell-yolk to do whatever it is that Evie does. "Solas, is there a way up the ramparts?"

The frowns at her, his expression a mixture of worry and disapproval.

"I am wondering if we can avoid most of the fight, and get Evie close enough to the rift."

He considers this, then nods. "I saw a ladder on the other side of this wall. Though I am unsure as to where it leads."

Margo presses the last regeneration draught into his hand. "Try to stay alive, yes? I will remind you that we have an appointment." Unless, of course, the dream was only that — or worse, unless its other participant was not who he appeared to be.

"We do indeed." And there is definitely a trace of a smile now, so Margo feels cautiously optimistic that the elf changed his mind about expiring tragically. "I would not miss it, da'nas."

"And there's your incentive to not get killed," Margo grins — because inappropriate flirtation beats mind-numbing terror — and then she hooks her good arm around Evie's, and they strike off in the direction Solas indicated.

At her back, she can hear fighting, but it all sounds relatively sluggish. The whistling of arrows, the occasional clash of metal, intermittent demonic screeching all blend together and fade into the background, but she still has the feeling that it's all her side can do to not get overrun.

They do find the ladder to the top of the ramparts, tucked away in the darkest part of the ruin. The wood is rickety and half-rotted. Margo goes first, letting Evie bring up the rear. Somehow, they manage not to fall.

“Do you like heights?” Evie asks suddenly, once they are atop the rampart. “I really like heights. Bann Trevelyan always said I shouldn’t climb around everywhere like some ‘demented squirrel’ — but you just feel so much better when you’re up above the whole mess of it, and see everything. It’s like... easier to breathe.”

Margo, who is not a giant fan of heights on the best of days, just nods and makes some encouraging noise as they teeter along the crumbling rampart.

Eventually, they make it to the farthest point of the wall — right above Cassandra’s strategic position. The amount of demons in the clearing has diminished, but not by much. And it looks like the hell-yolk has decided to regroup, and is now sprouting green crystal protrusions like the world’s most expensive and useless Czech hedgehog.

Evie’s hand glows green.

“I can reach it!”

“Do it, kid,” Margo nods.

Evie thrusts her hand at the rift. Green lightning shoots from her palm, straight into the crystal-formerly-known-as-yolk. Margo looks down. There is a distinct change in the fortunes of her companions. Cassandra is charging the group of demons with quick, precise strikes, and each blow connects as designed. Varric’s bolts fly true. And Solas swings his staff with practiced ease, raining freezing spells on the demonic horde (or what’s left of it) — and, for a second, Margo finds herself mesmerized by the effortless elegance of his movements.

And then the green crystal mass explodes with a shock wave. Margo pulls out her last grenade, and she hurls it into the circle of otherworldly fauna. The demons disintegrate into ethereal rags, reabsorbed into the rift’s center of gravity.

“You must seal it!” Solas cries out below, and Evie reaches her hand forward again, screaming through whatever physical anguish this process is causing her, her face drawn in an expression of pained concentration. Despite the pain and terror, she does not stop. Another shock wave hits them — this one with a distinct smell of rot — and the rift collapses on itself, then winks out of existence, the air around it resealing with a hollow pop.

Down by the ramparts, Jan, bloody but alive, limps towards the rest of the group. Harding is close on his heels, and she greets Cassandra with a hearty handshake.

Evie turns around, her cheeks still streaked with tears, but her expression is full of new-found resolve.

“I did it! Margo, I did it, I closed it!”

Margo grins at her. They’re alive. They made it out alive. “Of course you did.”

Still grinning, Margo steps forward to give Evie a hug, and then a loose stone shifts under her foot. She crouches down on instinct, trying to regain her balance. It would have worked, too, if not for the freaky, completely uncalled for gust of wind that blows dust from the wall’s eroded surface into her eyes. She throws her hands up, her heel slipping on the unstable cobblestone, and, with a brief wobble at the edge of the wall, Margo loses her footing, and plummets down.

“Margo, no!”

She gets a glimpse of Evie’s panicked face before it careens out of view.

The last thing she sees before her body breaks against the stones at the foot of the ramparts is the crimson disk of the rising sun slicing through the feathery gray foam of morning clouds.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Lady Luck, who can be a fickle mistress. Also, wonky physics, and Czech hedgehogs, the colloquial name for one type of WW-2 anti-tank barricade.

Next up: Competing interests; the Inquisition expands its ranks; negotiations around Orlesian cuisine

Adrift

Chapter Summary

In which Margo reincorporates

Chapter Notes

Some tongue-in-cheek fluff for your weekend reading :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

She drifts, unmoored and shapeless in an amorphous vastness with no beginning and no end. There is neither sound nor form, no sensory input except for the experience of two planes running in parallel — pure abstractions, their *flatness* and lack of intersection their only qualia. She — whoever she is — doesn't know how much time passes, for time is not a relevant parameter where she now dwells. Her memory of a thing called "time" is no more than an artifact of language.

After — after a "before" and an "after" come into being relative to each other — after, when the two planes curl on themselves to form something like a tunnel [*trunk*], after, when the tunnel [*trunk*] multiplies into an infinity of little passages [*limbs*], and she is gently pulled through the maze of corridors [*branchlets*] towards a single oblong shape like a door [*leaf*] or, perhaps, a mirror [*leaf*], after all that, she discovers Sound.

At first, Sound is no more than empty stimulus. It is better than aimless drifting, so she clings to it, until Sound turns into a container for Sense.

Words form, but not hers.

"We cannot tarry much longer. The Inquisition's meeting with the clerics must happen, and soon."
A steely, crisply accented voice.

"I do not work miracles, Cassandra. I strongly recommend not moving her while the bones are mending. And while I would certainly not presume to delay you, I doubt the presence of an apostate will sway the Chantry in the Inquisition's favor." Tired. Exhausted by the same debate.

A pause.

"Solas, you are being completely unreasonable. When you joined with the Inquisition, you realized the importance of what we were doing. Each of us has a role here." Uneasy.

"I simply wish to offer my assistance in ways that would be *tangibly* productive, Seeker." Heat beneath the ice.

"If... if this is about your safety, then I assure you that you will be in no more danger from the clerics than the rest of us. Now is not the time to develop scruples about your apostasy."

A sigh. "This debate is pointless."

“Be that as it may, decisions must be made. There are more immediate matters to attend to than your duties as a healer. We cannot endanger the Inquisition’s progress on account of a single operative.”

A long pause.

“The moral slope you walk is a slippery one, Seeker. I fear you might not find its bottom to your liking.” Ice beneath the heat.

“Have a care, mage. Until such a time as your skills in controlling the Herald’s mark become replaceable, your oath binds you.”

“Then I shall wait with bated breath for a replacement, undoubtedly forthcoming.”

A third voice. The dwarf.

“Enough, you two! You’re going to wake everyone up.”

She tries to anchor herself, but there is nothing to attach to. The fleshy form on the other side feels too heavy. Too painful. She drifts.

“Let him sleep, Seeker. He can use the rest.” The dwarf. Casual. Conciliatory.

“Ugh!” Utterly disgusted. “He is not thinking clearly.” Hard. Speaking through impatience.

A frustrated sigh. “He’s just trying to do what he thinks is the right thing.”

“Is that what you call this interminable stalling? He is being rather selective about which aspect of the ‘right thing’ he chooses to be zealous about. Certainly, the Inquisition needs healers. But it is equally his duty to accompany the Herald. If this procrastination is brought on by his distaste for the Chantry...”

A sigh. “You know, Seeker, I really don’t think that this is what’s going on here.” A bit sarcastic. Also, frustrated.

“Then what?”

A pause.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never found yourself actually giving a shit, Cassandra.”

“Of course, I ‘give a shit,’ Varric! Would I be here if I did not?” Lonely.

“It’s not...” Grumbling. “Do you ever think that people might be more than fodder for someone’s war, Seeker? Do you pause, and look up? You might be surprised to find that there’s still a world out here. With people in it.” Amused. A bit bitter, and unsure why. Wants an answer, but doesn’t know which one.

“Of course I do, Varric, do not be ridiculous.” A long pause. “But not everyone is like you. Do you ever think of people as more than fodder for your stories?” Angry, but mostly just vulnerable. Hoping he doesn’t notice.

“Shhh!” A third voice. “Get a tent.”

“It’s not... like that!” Outrage hiding embarrassment.

A quiet chortle.

“I swear, dwarf, if...”

She drifts.

“Seeker Pentaghast, I’m very sorry, I just don’t think one more day will make a difference, and Solas says...” The kid. Nervous, but resolved.

“I know what Solas says, Herald. He has been saying the same thing for the last three days. But we cannot wait any longer. Leliana sends news that Mother Giselle’s recommendation has reached Orlais. If we do not go at once, we lose whatever advantage her endorsement might have gained us.”

“But surely one more day will not make that much of a difference?”

“It is Orlais, Lady Trevelyan. You know as well as I do that the social climate changes there in an instant.”

She drifts.

“I am happy you decided to join us, Warden Blackwall. Please, assist Harding with securing this location, then report back to Haven.”

A new voice. Gruff. Edged with an old ache. “Understood, Seeker. Glad to be of service.” A pause. “What is it, Herald?”

“You don’t happen to have a griffon, do you?” The kid. Excited.

“A griffon?” A rumbling chuckle. “M’afraid not, my lady.”

“Aw, well. I guess... that’s all right. I just thought it would be nice to have a griffon because then you could fly high up, and then surveying the area would be so much easier, wouldn’t it? Though I suppose you’d need to feed it and care for it. And store is somewhere, I guess. I don’t think I know what griffons eat, now that I think about it.”

“They were predators.” Slightly discomfited throat-clearing. “According to Warden... ehem... records.”

“You know their favorite meal was damsels, Tricksy? Preferably in distress, but I guess they’d make do.”

“Really? But why *damsels* ?” Puzzled. “Do women taste better?”

Choked sounds. Someone chortling. “Do you really want an answer to that, Your Heraldship?”

“For the love of Andraste, Varric! If you *would not mind* .” Utterly scandalized. “Your travel gear will not magically gather itself.”

“Well, Seeker. We’re ready. You all packed up, Your Heraldness?”

“I still think we should listen to Solas and stay one more day. I... I mean, it’s not like the clerics will run away. Will they?” Pleading.

“Solas has finally agreed that, at this point, it is out of his hands. Scout Harding and the others will look after the agent. Her injuries are healing well. The question is whether she will wake up, and this depends on the Maker, not us.” Urgent. Impatient.

“Come on, Tricksy. You heard the Seeker. The Orlesian Chantry isn’t going to recruit itself.”

“Varric, why do I get to be ‘Tricksy’?”

“I just have a feeling about these things. Let’s go.”

“You have your orders, scout.”

“Affirmative, Seeker.” Bright, a bit relieved. “We will secure the location, set up a permanent camp, finish up the herbalism survey. There’s also the Carta presence I wouldn’t mind investigating. By your leave, of course.”

“Stay cautious. We cannot afford to lose more people.”

“Of course. No heroics.”

A pause. “You have my thanks.”

“It is my hope that you might still find your way back, lethallan.” Quiet and resigned. A long hesitation. “We have an appointment, as I recall. I intend to hold you to it.”

“Hey, didn’t we have more sacks?” Bad News. Totally confused by the unsurmountable arithmetic problem.

“Blighted blood lotus, stinks like a giant’s arse, it does. I say we just chuck it. Ain’t carrying this shite on my back all the way to Haven. Methinks someone else can deal with it, like.” Tweedle.

Paws off my reeds, shitgibbon!

A foothold. She stops drifting.

Margo wakes up in the middle of the night to someone feeding her bone broth. Her body feels heavy, but there is no pain.

“Looks like you’ll make it after all, lass.” Bad News. Great. To Margo’s surprise, he is not being opportunistic with his hands — his hold on her is shockingly virtuous.

“How long have I been out?” she asks between spoonfuls of broth. Her voice is rusty.

“Long enough for me to want to drown Marek in the lake. Saved your sacks of lotus from certain destruction, by the way. You owe me a pint. But I’ll take other displays of gratitude whenever

you're up for it."

"Pint it is."

He laughs, then he maneuvers her back into her bedroll. A scratchy blanket lands on top of her. Margo drifts off to Harding and Jan singing some bawdy jaunty about Andraste's mabari. Whatever that is.

When she opens her eyes again, it is within a dream — a proper dream, the first fully formed one since her unmooring.

She looks around, expecting the now typical sight — the field of summer grasses — but, instead, she is in Adan's apothecary. The hearth fire is unlit, the sky outside the window an inky black. A single candle burns on the desk. In its unsteady flicker, shadows shift along the walls.

Solas is sitting in one of the chairs, but when he notices her, he springs to his feet, his features tense.

"You have regained enough of yourself to find your way back." A pause. "Good." He forces his face into a neutral expression, but the mask isn't entirely seamless — though Margo isn't entirely sure what it is meant to conceal. "When I could not sense your presence in the Fade for several days after we left, I became... concerned." He trails off. Everything about the elf's posture telegraphs uncertainty, an odd affect to see dream-side, where he so clearly feels more at ease.

Margo takes a few steps forward. "Ok. Oof... all right. Hhaaa. Just... Give it to me straight. Did... did the fall damage the spinal cord? Will I be able to walk?"

It is the only thought her mind currently has room for.

Solas frowns, but then his expression softens as the meaning of her question reaches him. "No, da'nas, you are not paralyzed. Your body is healing well. I was able to cast a barrier spell when I heard the Herald's cry. It absorbed much of the impact." At Margo's questioning look, he elaborates, his composure regained now that the topic has turned to the technical aspects. "I had to correct for the velocity of the falling object. Adjusting a static spell for accel-..."

Margo has stopped listening. She is so absolutely elated by the news that she is practically jumping up and down. She's alive! She's not going to be paralyzed! She'll walk! She crosses over to Solas, and, before the saner part of her mind has time to protest, she cups his face, lifts up on her toes, and plants a firm kiss at the corner of his lips.

And then she blinks and steps away, because... Well, maybe that was a tad impulsive.

The elf's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. His ears turn pink. And then his eyes travel to her mouth, and he looks like he is having a very lively debate with himself about what to do about this new development. He shakes his head, takes a half-step forward — and a full step back. Then he stops in his tracks and simply stares at her with an expression of almost comical confusion.

Margo grins, probably totally sheepishly, but she is so relieved it is hard to put into words. "To be clear, that was meant as a 'thank you,' though I suppose I should have verbalized it instead. Anyway. Yes. *Thank you*. For putting me back together. Again." And then she snorts. Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall... She supposes the humor would be a bit lost on him, but maybe he would find the little rhyme amusing too — especially the debates about whether or not it refers to King Richard the III, an egg, or a siege engine. Since, clearly, all three are known to fall off walls. "I

feel like I'm making a bad habit of this, but you saved my hide. Again."

Solas, in the meantime, decides to manage whatever internal conflict he might be experiencing the usual way: by pacing around the room, hands folded at his back.

"Ah, yes. You are welcome. My point..." He clears his throat, turns around, and paces in the other direction. "My point is that because the barrier was cast mid-fall, your body still sustained some damage, and it will be a week of rest, at least, before you are fully mended. I strongly recommend you abstain from doing anything stupid in the meantime."

Margo grins. "Stupid? I never do anything stupid. Just... ill-advised. And only in retrospect."

He stops his oscillations and comes to stand in front of her, balancing a little on the balls of his feet. "And you feel... yourself? Connected to this body?"

Margo considers his question. "Yes. It took some time, but I believe I 'reincorporated.'"

That gets her a chuckle, along with a worried frown.

"I'm fine. Apparently, you do, in fact, work miracles." She replays his earlier words in her head—or its virtual variant, in any case. "Wait, you said a few days since... Where are you, exactly? Geographically, I mean?"

"Accompanying the others to Val Royaux, as per Cassandra's very insistent requests." At her blank look, he adds "the capital city of Orlais."

Aha! That's the French-sounding kingdom somewhere west from where they are that Cassandra and the others have been debating about while she was stuck in the topological anomaly. "Because Evie needs to collect the support of the Chantry clerics, did I overhear this right?"

"Futile as the exercise will likely prove to be."

"You don't put much faith in their ability to help?"

"I do not put much faith in the Chantry's willingness to put aside its petty squabbles and appetite for worldly power, especially considering the Inquisition's claims to Lady Trevelyan's status as Herald of Andraste."

Bloated religious organization meddling in politics. Some things stay constant. "Are there other allies that might be persuaded to come on board while you're there?"

Solas shrugs. "It is possible. Though I do not doubt that if they do, it will be to further their own agendas."

Well, perhaps there are other useful aspects to Orlais. Maybe the similarities with France do not end with linguistics?

"Solas, do they have bakeries in Val Royaux? And before you ask... In my world, there is a geopolitical entity that sounds remarkably similar to this Orlais, and they came up with a delightful thing called *éclairs*, which is this custard-filled choux dough number..."

Solas blinks, and then his expression turns profoundly peeved. "I have spent the better part of the week reassembling your fractured bones shard by broken shard while scouring the Fade for your wayward spirit. And now you are suggesting that you would like me to bring you a *pastry*?" And he sounds equal parts incredulous, scandalized, and entertained by this.

“Well, now that you mention it...”

The elf shakes his head, before throwing up his hands in a gesture that Margo guesses is meant to express a state of bafflement of truly cosmic proportions. “*Mythal’enaste*, da’ nas, what am I supposed to do with you?”

The temptation to tease him is almost overwhelming, but there was some kind of important matter she wanted to bring up... Aha. The wonky physics. “Glad you asked! How do you feel about puzzles?”

“Puzzles,” he repeats, with an expression that leaves absolutely no doubt about his opinion of her sanity.

“Yes. A puzzle that’s been niggling at me. You said there were strange magics in the fort — something that affected your ability to cast.”

Solas nods, his face attentive once again. His earlier amused irritation is gone without a trace.

“And, it wasn’t just you, yes? You saw Varric’s arrows? Cassandra tripping over herself?”

Another nod.

“When I entered the perimeter, it began to affect me as well. I am not normally quite this clumsy.”

“I should hope not.” He almost manages to hide the wry note.

Margo sighs. “I noticed something when we were on the ramparts. The three of you were suddenly able to fight again, without the strange... luck handicap.”

Solas’s gaze drifts as he considers her model. “You are correct. It is as if our luck had turned then — but not yours.” His features harden at the memory. “I saw you. When you lost your footing. It was as if a gust of wind had pushed you off the wall.”

Margo represses an involuntary shudder. “Threw dust in my eyes, actually, but I suppose the result was the same. Look, correlation doesn’t mean causation — this may be nothing more than two coinciding, but independent events — but there was one variable that did, in fact, change.”

His eyes widen for a second. “The Herald.”

“Precisely. Evie.” She pauses. “As you know, my world does not have magic as yours does.”

“I have gathered as much. In fact, I have been quite curious as to how you make sense of the magic you see here.”

How, indeed. Margo tries to formulate a response. She taps the knuckle of her finger against her lips, abstractly surprised that the “I’m thinking” tic carried over to the Fade. Then she looks up and realizes that it seems to have a distinctly distracting effect on the elf. She stops. He wrestles his gaze from her mouth and clears his throat.

“So, to answer your question... one optic through which you might describe magic is probability.” She is not sure if the term is in the Theodosian repertoire, or whether it means the same thing, but perhaps the explanation will take care of whatever false cognates there might be. “Let’s take a lightning strike. You might say that by causing it, you are bending probability such that a lightning bolt would hit at a precise moment, and at a precise location, as a factor of your will.” She makes a “Zeus smiting mortals with lightning bolts” gesture with her hand, accompanied by a little sound

effect.

Solas purses his lips, but then his expression resolves, through a quick sequence of emotions — amusement, understanding, curiosity — into an eventual smile. “Ah. By probability, you do not simply mean a mere turn of phrase — not abstract chance — but, rather, a precise parameter?”

“Yes.” Of course, she’s not a scientist by training, and it’s not like she can explain probability in its statistical sense... But the concept might have cultural traction, and she wonders whether it could port to this world enough that Solas would find some parallels. “I wish I could explain this more precisely, but bear with me. Is it possible that there’s something about the magic in Evie’s mark that skews probability — luck — the other way?”

He considers this. “A hex would be a crude example of such magic, diminishing the target’s competence or skill, but it requires impressive concentration, unlikely to be sustained for long even by experienced mages. The Herald is no mage, despite the power contained in the mark. But something certainly appears to tip the scales not in our favor. It is an interesting problem, and bears further examination...”

She waits for him to finish his thought.

“The effects, whatever their underlying cause, tend to fluctuate.”

“Is there a pattern? Something systematic you noticed?”

He takes a few seconds to reflect on the question. “It is more pronounced in situations where danger is imminent. Though it is curious that it would affect you just the same, considering...” Solas stops abruptly. His eyes lock on hers, then travel along her face — cheekbone, jawline, lips. His brows are drawn in a quizzical frown as if he is trying to puzzle out the meaning of some arcane symbol.

“Considering I am not exactly... standard issue for your world, never mind the inadvertent body-snatching and resulting mimicry, yes.” She takes a breath. “If I could give it back, I would.”

For a moment, the elf looks abashed and almost grief-stricken, and then he inclines his head. “I intended no offense.”

There was an important point she was trying to impart, right? “It’s not Evie’s fault, whatever it is. She asked for none of this. However, please, try to stay safe — even if the temptation to test the ‘dangerous situations’ hypothesis is overwhelming. Don’t... I don’t know, start a duel while you’re trying to sweet-talk the clerics, yes?”

She gets a small smile for that one. “Try as I might to picture this scenario, it is unlikely that the clerics of the Orlesian Chantry will find an apostate’s ‘sweet-talk’ persuasive. Let us hope that Seeker Pentaghast or Lady Trevelyan take this task upon themselves.”

Margo shrugs. “Don’t sell yourself short. If I were a cleric, I’m sure I would find you perfectly persuasive.”

She meant it in the sense that clerics are probably well-disposed to complex exegetical debates, but somehow it comes out sounding quite a bit more... ambiguous.

Uh-oh. She knows this smirk. This will be followed by some kind of outrageous statement, but then again she did set herself up for it, so no point in crying foul now...

But Solas says nothing. Just considers her with a distinctly mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“Yes?”

“Oh, no matter.” Fake innocence at its finest. “I was simply trying to imagine you as a cleric. In Chantry robes.”

Margo cocks an eyebrow. “That’s a rather curious mental exercise. Whatever for? Are they particularly fetching robes?”

“Not at all. Quite awful, in fact.”

“Then... why?”

“Would you prefer it if I envisioned you without them?”

He looks quite pleased with himself. Margo narrows her eyes. “You know you're an outrageous flirt, right?”

Solas chuckles quietly, but then his momentary mirth takes a hard turn for the wistful. “Ah, da'nas, you are correct. Compliments about your physical form come easily. They are objectively true, of course, but they are also a superficial distraction from the fact that it is when I encounter your spirit that words seem to elude me.”

Margo blinks. Processes. And then the warm and fuzzies tackle her — as they do — and she throws up her hands in her own rendition of cosmic befuddlement.

“I'll amend my earlier statement. You're an *egregious* flirt.”

His smile becomes guarded. “I see no harm in it — nothing qualitatively different from any other exercise that aids in sharpening one’s wit. But I will abstain from it if it is unwelcome.”

This time, it’s Margo’s turn to chortle. “You know, you could also consider memorizing poetry, or do multiplications in your head instead. But, sure, by all means, knock yourself out. Should I add you to my training schedule? I’m sure I can squeeze in a ‘wit sharpening’ slot, right between pummeling Commander Rutherford with snowballs, and trying not to poison myself at Master Adan’s behest.”

Solas’s gaze turns serious, all traces of his earlier playfulness dissipated. “Do strive to stay in one piece while we are away. There is the matter of our appointment.”

“Maybe it'll even go better than the last round of experimentation.”

The elf frowns in mild vexation. “One hopes.” Then his expression softens. “I... do enjoy our talks.”

On impulse, Margo brushes her fingertips against the back of his hand. His fingers twitch, then capture hers, briefly, before letting go.

Margo stuffs her hands into her pockets. Thank you, dreamworld, for providing them. “Don’t forget about the pastry.”

Solas’s expression turns speculative. “I wonder what you might think of frilly cakes...”

Before she has time to inquire whether frilly cakes and éclairs share any similarities, Margo wakes up for good.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by griffons and frilly cakes. Now, imagine a frilly cake (I picture them as macarons).

Next up: With friends like these...

Nested Dolls

Chapter Summary

In which Margo makes some new friends, give or take.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“No, no, no! Step to the side when you lunge. See how you're open to a pummel strike here... or here?” The great bearded menace proceeds to demonstrate what a pommel strike to the clavicle might feel like under less controlled circumstances. To this end, he grabs ahold of Margo’s forearm – conveniently extended, practice dagger and all – and he gives it a casual little jerk, which has the unhappy effect of bringing the crunchy part of her shoulder in close contact with the clubby part of his sword. Margo greets this with a displeased “oof.” “If this were a real fight, you'd have dropped your weapon and it would be over. Step, jab, step, regroup — don't leave your arm out like that, keep it close to the body. Good. Come at me again.”

This time, Margo dives under the bear's sword arm, and scuttles out of the way, trying to get a good kidney stab in before her opponent has the chance to permanently disable her with some other kind of “symbolic” death blow.

She doesn’t get far. Warden Blackwall, defying all known laws of physics concerning the relationship between mass and velocity, sweeps out with his foot. Margo anticipates the move and jumps back, narrowly avoiding being tripped up, but the accursed bear uses her own backward momentum to tackle her with some kind of wrestling move. He dumps her in the nearest snowbank.

All to the slow clapping of the giant Qunari, and to Sera’s rather licentious whistle.

“Well, Beardy, this time it took you a whole five minutes to get her on her back. I say that’s an improvement!”

Margo, still ensconced in her snow pile, launches a counteroffensive with a quick flurry of snowballs. Sera dodges in time, but doesn't account for the bow on her back, and the snowball splits in half, cut by the bowstring. The other two projectiles connect — one crashes against Blackwall’s breastplate and sprays up into his beard, and the other breaks against the Qunari's horn. Margo is fairly certain that the only reason she manages to hit the two warriors in the first place is that they were simply not expecting such immature duplicity from her. Sera picks up the two halves of the bisected snowball, and starts sculpting them into something distinctly R-rated.

“Not bad.” The Iron Bull wipes off the snow from his head as if the very nature of the substance offends him deeply. “If these were actual grenades, you’d have two injured opponents, and one missing a face. Or a beard, anyway. Don’t know if there’s any kind of face under there.”

Sera, in the meantime, squints at her handiwork. “Snitties? No. Snests? Bleargh. Snoobies!” She augments one of the training dummies with her take on snow sculptures. “Anyway, still shite at close combat. Oooh! Unless faking it! Rolling around with Beardy all close and personal like...” Sera starts making kissy noises until the aforementioned Warden deposits the archer into the same snow bank.

“Trying to beat some kind of personal record there, big guy?” the Qunari queries.

Taken individually, the new additions to the Inquisition’s ranks seem like perfectly reasonable people — safe, perhaps, for Sera. But when combined together, some unholy chemical reaction takes place, and the level of trash talk devolves from whatever regular army banter one might expect in your average, run of the mill barracks, to something only seen among twelve year old boys with a sugar high.

Over the week that passed since their return from the Hinterlands, the physical consequences of Margo's reenactment of Humpty Dumpty slowly dissipated. Either she got ridiculously lucky, or Thedas’s combination of magic and alchemy completely skews the parameters of what normal mortality and life expectancy might look like. Still. Though Solas fixed the majority of the damage, the stiffness and muscle aches — not to mention the absolutely maddening subcutaneous itch, which Margo attributed to the healing process — proved enough of a distraction that she finally submitted herself to Adan's experimental plans. The alchemist, having delivered a rather long and detailed lecture on proper safety precautions when scaling crumbling ramparts, brought out a new set of alchemy books. “We need to improve the healing tonics anyway,” he offered by way of an explanation, clearly happy now that said improvement could be tested with the help of a willing guinea pig.

Whatever might be said of Evie, the kid has been busy. Blackwall, Sera, and the Qunari joined the cause all in the span of two weeks. According to Harding’s grapevine — which, from what Margo can tell, is really more of an industrial-sized orchard with an adjacent winery — the Inquisitorial quartet went off to court yet another addition, an Orlesian high-society mage with the discouraging moniker of “Madame de Fer.” Whether the label is meant to suggest their prospective ally’s strong endorsement of economic austerity measures, evoke her similarity with the medieval torture device (which Margo has always thought to be a juicer designed with a vampire customer in mind), or simply refer to a penchant for heavy metal, none of it strikes Margo as particularly auspicious

At least they’re all still alive. From everything she heard about Orlais, Margo has a strong suspicion that attending Orlesian high society salons while dead would be considered gauche, and quite possibly very last season. Then again, since there have been no repeat visits from Solas during her excursions into the Fade, she can't confirm the veracity of any of the rumors first hand. And it isn’t that she is feeling outright worried about it, but...

Once she finally manages to identify the exact nature of the emotion, Margo emits an exasperated grunt — almost spilling the potion she is working on — and proceeds to smack her forehead with the heel of her palm, on the slim hope that this will realign her clearly addled brain. Because the structure of feeling is a bit too similar to waiting for that text message or phone call (except, in dream form), and she is too old for this shit and has better things to do. No way. Warm and fuzzies are all well and good. But not this. She’s not about to start pining. Or languishing. Or any other 19th century Victorian affliction. Hellmouth can freeze over first. Or spit out yodeling marmots with a penchant for Swiss chocolate. Or both.

So Margo does what any accidental body snatcher with an emotional problem to actively ignore would do: she decides to churn virtue from necessity, and make new friends.

The Qunari is first. After the fifth time she “accidentally” passes by his tent on her way to the forge on entirely fabricated pretenses, he calls after her. “If you want to gawk, Blondie, do us both a favor and gawk properly. Your running around is giving me a headache.”

Margo winces — no one likes to be called out on their bullshit — but she decides that she might as well take the bull by the horns, as it were.

"I'm sorry." She approaches. It's like one of those optical distortions, whereby the Homo Minotauricus in the rearview mirror is most certainly larger than he appears. And has pointier horns. "I'm Margo. You are Qunari, correct?"

The giant nods. "The Iron Bull. What's your role here, Blondie? By the dress, I'd say one of Leliana's people, though you don't move like one."

Margo tenses, but her contusion story rolls off the tongue readily enough. "So I guess for now, I'm Master Adan's aid," she adds.

The Qunari accepts her explanation with a nod, though not before a strange little pause. "Seen it happen. Explains why you were gawking. Never seen one of us before, or can't remember whether you have?"

Margo shrugs. "Either way, the effect is the same."

"All right, Blondie." The Bull sighs a bit theatrically. "I can see you wanna ask something. What is it?"

Margo takes the invitation at face value and proceeds to pepper the Qunari with a slew of rather nosy cultural questions. She gets a series of more or less detailed answers, which leave her with the impression that the Qun is what would have happened if George Orwell had read a lot of pop Buddhism before writing *1984*.

"You know, this is very gracious of you." It seems only polite to thank the fellow. "It's not that often that one gets an invitation to openly stare and then ask invasive questions. I do hope dragons are also this accommodating."

This gets the giant to guffaw. "Never seen a dragon either, huh? They're not much for talking." He launches into an enthusiastic lecture on how to kill said dragons, regardless of how talkative they may or may not be.

From there, they somehow get to the relative merits of plant versus animal-derived poisons, and from there it's not exactly a fast route to friendship, but at least they both agree that the other person has their priorities straight.

Blackwall turns out reasonably friendly too, and Margo thinks it's mostly because he's a little lonely, and because her erstwhile broken state earned her sympathy points. He keeps volunteering for the odd manual labor jobs around the camp, and, having noticed this commendable trait, Master Adan sends Margo to recruit the Warden to help haul the new, intimidatingly large ingredient mill from the smithy to the apothecary. "Go use your feminine wiles," he instructs, and waves his hand at the door.

As it turns out, no feminine wiles are required, since the Warden is more than happy to lend a hand. They talk about the merits — or rather the lack thereof — of most restorative draughts, and Blackwall reveals that he has a terrible time with the standard elfroot decoction.

"It is pretty bitter," Margo clucks sympathetically, trying to keep the amusement out of her voice.

"It's fucking vile, is what it is," the Warden corrects.

Margo grins. "I can try to brew you a special batch that neutralizes some of the taste, if you want."

It's impossible to actually tell what his facial expression might be behind all that lush growth, but, based on the eyes, she thinks it's surprised amusement? Maybe?

“If you do, I’ll trade you melee lessons for it.”

“Deal,” Margo nods, and they shake hands.

Sera turns out to be the hardest one by far.

“Aaaand, shite, you’re an elf. Are you one of them elfie ones? No face tats, right, but that don't mean you're not an arse. Like that bald fella, whatshisname. 'Our empire had advanced magics while humans were still wearing furs.' Blah, blah, blah, lot of good that did. Pish.”

Margo furrows her brow trying to follow all this. “What’s an elfie elf?” she finally asks. That seems safe enough.

“You know. Like it's something you wanna wear. History, yeah, but you're playing dress-up with it.”

“I am definitely not that,” Margo volunteers carefully. Primarily because she has a very slim idea what "elfiness" looks like beyond the phenotypical differences, let alone how one would go about "wearing" it. But she does make a mental note of learning more about the internal divisions and politics of elven identity. It seems like it's the least she can do if she’s going to inhabit this body for the foreseeable future.

“Ah, well. Might be alright, then.”

And this is how they end up where they are, which is to say, with snow in uncomfortable places. Every day, one of them helps Margo “re-train” her skills, in exchange for very specific, customized alchemical preparations. Ironically, all three do not — or pretend they do not — realize that the two others are trading their mentorship for precisely the same favor. Sera wants an ointment that keeps her toes warm, but isn’t greasy on application because “Ew, squishy toes!” For Blackwall’s elfroot aversion, Margo simply uses molasses in the final mixture.

Eventually, the Qunari makes his own request as well. The skin under his eyepatch chafes in Haven’s cold weather, so when he flips up the black leather strip for Margo to take a look, she winces sympathetically. She whips up the ointment the same day. That seems to get the giant more firmly in her camp. “All right, Blondie. I’ll help you work with poisoned weapons. Once you make it past Big Guy.” She does wonder whether he would be quite so magnanimous if he knew that she used Auntie’s recipe for diaper rash cream as the foundation for the salve.

The tavern is packed, hot, and reeks of cabbage stew. They settle at a table next to Harding, Jan, and a handful of other scouts, fresh from patrol in some questionable place called The Fallow Mire. Harding makes a sour face at the memory. “Maker's Breath, that place is foul.”

“What’s in the Fallow Mire?” Margo asks.

“Dead shit. Lots and lot of dead shit.” For once, Jan looks too disgusted to attempt to chase tail. The entire company has a kind of lingering decomposition smell — faint, but still there. “Also, Avvar. Dead shit and Avvar. I don’t know how I offended the spymaster to get this assignment.”

Sera, already done with her second bowl of cabbage soup, comes back with another round of beers, and a pretzel she somehow managed to sweet-talk Flissa into giving her. “Dead things, boring shite, blah, blah, blah. What are we playing? ‘Truth or dare’ or ‘who would you rather’?”

Blackwall and Harding groan in annoyance simultaneously.

Margo gets up. “And that’s my cue to go make some lyrium potions for the impending new mage.”

“Not so fast.”

She gives Iron Bull a dirty look. Et tu, Brutus?

“I’ll start. Blondie. Who would you rather, a Vint, or a Qunari?”

Margo shoots him a quick look, trying to gauge what’s behind the question. And while her other table companions all sport a predictable range of expressions — from mildly exasperated to amused to curious — the horned mountain is hiding a very attentive look behind the casual mask. Margo wonders, not for the first time, how many practicing spymasters there are in the Inquisition.

“I’m outa here,” she states with great dignity.

“Well, I think we all know the answer to that one anyway,” Jan winks.

Harding shoots Margo an apologetic look. Aha. So Maile’s legacy is making the rounds. Well, good to know.

“S’easy, Blondie. Qunari. Cuz ‘rrraar!’ Right?” Sera looks around, her brows drawn in puzzlement. She genuinely looks like she hasn’t heard any of the circulating rumors.

Margo’s heartbeat accelerates. Not that this is catastrophic, but she would rather extricate herself from the uncomfortable direction of the conversation — or, minimally, to control its unfolding.

She forces herself to sit. This is the problem with this world. Everyone seems to have secrets within secrets, like whole nested dolls worth of secrets that sometimes aren’t even yours to keep. Such as, for example, what she now suspects about Evie, an unpleasant little hunch that has been steadily gnawing at her, all the more so because she can neither share it, nor verify it safely.

“Fine, fine.” Her relenting is met with a few hoots. “A Vint or a Qunari, was that the question?”

She’s stalling of course, and a quick look at the Iron Bull tells her that he knows this.

He nods. “That’s right, Blondie. Simple, really.”

“Ok, what are the other parameters at play? What is their respective training?”

Bull cocks an eyebrow at this — the scarred one above his bad eye — but he humors her. “Lets even the odds, and say they’re both mages.”

Margo suppresses a smile, because, of course, he’s just given her the perfect out. Thank the Heavens for Adan indulging her reading habits on Theodosian politics. “Then, I’d pick the Qunari.”

Jan frowns. “Wait, what? Why?”

“Because at least he wouldn’t talk your ear off,” she grins, miming the act of sewing her mouth shut.

This earns her a hearty set of guffaws, especially from the women at the table. Margo can’t help but sigh inwardly, an unpleasant sense of foreboding settling in the pit of her stomach. She is not sure that the image of the tough as nails, hardened operative that Maile has left as her legacy is one she wants to wear. And the irony, of course, is that Maile herself was not that.

“And now, I’m off. Sera, do you want my turn?”

Sera grins. "Blackwall. Lady Montilyet or Seeker Pentaghost?"

On her way to the door, she hears Blackwall choke on his beer. "Maker's balls, Sera, I'm not answering that."

Margo makes her way to the apothecary, but she foregoes the potion making in favor of an early night. She even has an excuse. She's had ample time to mull over the Evie problem, and she tells herself that what she really needs is someone to talk to about it. Right. Just... someone to bounce ideas off. Nothing more.

She closes her eyes.

She is in Solas's cabin. Barely enough light filters through the window to etch out the contours of the furniture, and the house feels empty, long left unoccupied.

Solas is sitting on the bed, elbows on his knees, his gaze trained on the floor — in a position so similar to the one she remembers from their unfortunate ritual that Margo almost instinctively reaches out to him. Her heart does a painful little skip, and she tells herself that it is just the unexpected surprise of the Fade summons actually connecting.

"Hello, da'elgar," Solas says quietly without looking up.

After a moment of hesitation, she walks over to the bed and takes a seat next next to him. "Solas, are you all right? You seem..." She can't quite capture the words to describe his mood. It is not a sadness, exactly, but a kind of ancient melancholy that seems almost abstract, rather than prompted by anything specific. It feels profoundly unmendable.

He looks up at her, his eyes dark in the gloom. "I am fine. Simply tired. But you have come with a question. Something ailing your thoughts. Is it about the Herald?"

Margo looks at him, and wonders how he knows, and then of course, wonders whether this same issue has been ailing him as well. "Yes. I can't quite decide what we're supposed to do about it. As in, does she know? Is there even anything to know? Do we confront her? Do we tell the others? Cassandra, Cullen...? And what if she doesn't know, then where exactly does that leave us?"

She sighs, immensely grateful that she can share this festering ball of questions with someone who knows about them, and knows about her. Since their absence, her life has been further devolving into a careful waltz on treacherous grounds — "look casual, dear, oh and mind the snakes." It is a relief to put her guard down.

The elf nods. "But it is not your secret to share, little spirit, is it? Let us say you tell Cassandra, or any of the others. Then would that not alienate the girl from you? She does seem to place a lot of trust in her relationship with you. Do you truly wish to betray that trust? Or, if you confront her about your suspicions, how do you think she might react? She is young and sheltered, not accustomed to taking responsibility for herself." Solas sighs, then turns to face her. He brings his hand to her face, his knuckles brushing along the curve of her cheekbone. Margo freezes, mesmerized. Slowly, his palm cups her jaw, his thumb tracing the contour of her lips...

Something isn't... right. Subtle. But...

Margo jumps up and away from the bed, a spasm of ancient, sticky terror prickling the skin of her arms. She has always been of the school of thought that Medieval monks allegedly yelling things like "Away with you, Devil!" or any such dramatic demands for said evil entity to absquatulate

would be ineffectual at best, and induce fits of hilarity from the entity in question at worst.

Now, she really does understand why the monks might have been compelled to such pointless exclamations.

“You’re not Solas,” she states, trying to suppress the revulsion at the gothic horror of the close-but-imperfect imitation.

Not-Solas inclines its head, and its eyes are twinkling with humor — an intimately familiar expression. “No? That is very much a matter of perspective. Tell me, little spirit, what do you need from the wolf — or, really, not even the wolf itself, but the shadow of its shadow?”

Margo narrows her eyes at this strange appellation. Didn’t Baba make a similar sort of lupine reference?

“What could you possibly be hoping for? Companionship? A nice chat, perhaps? Someone to confide in? To counsel you through your uncertainties? Ah, and a little roll in the hay, maybe?” It laughs, and it sounds so much like Solas, but too loud on the high tones. “We could do any of that and more. No strings attached. A... private little secret. Because, little spirit, it is time you faced the truth. He is clearly occupied elsewhere. Do you think he would spare you a thought? Whereas *I*... am at your disposal.”

Oh fuck this very much, she doesn’t need this. “Thanks. Not interested. Go carpetbag somewhere else.”

The thing laughs again, and it’s all Margo can do not to scream — just to drown out the sound of it, its perverse little dissonance.

“I am getting better, am I not? You like your wolf melancholy. That gets you to come sit down, to offer consolation. And I remember you like him a little forward, too.”

It flicks its fingers, and Margo sways under a wave of lust so strong it is practically sickening.

“I learn fast, little spirit. Next time, you might not be able to tell the difference.” It gets up, covers the distance between them, and presses its lips to her ear. “Next time, you might not care.”

She does scream then, for lack of a better option.

There is a shift in the quality of the dream, as if the Fade folds on itself — the beginning of some cosmic origami — and Not-Solas dissolves into a puff of purplish vapor.

She straightens slowly on wobbly legs, the residual vertigo still pulling at the pit of her stomach. And then there is a steadying hand on her shoulder.

Margo turns and sees the elf. Again.

She peers into his face, trying to find the subtle distortions — like something else with a slightly different bone structure wearing his skin. But it truly does feel like Solas. Except, she doesn’t trust herself to know. Not for sure.

Solas’s expression is tense, but when he speaks, his tone is curt. “What happened?”

The temptation to dissolve into sobs and cling to him for comfort is almost overwhelming. Except, she supposes they’re not quite on those terms either — which, considering the latest development, is probably for the best. Instead, Margo straightens her shoulders. “My nice new friend Imshael

paid another visit.” As Solas's gaze darkens, Margo puts her hands on her hips, and cocks an eyebrow. “And when exactly are you lot coming back, anyway?”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by nappy cream.

Next up: reunions

On Being and Essence

Chapter Summary

In which Margo reunites with the team, has a discussion about the nature of spirits, and enjoys some pastries.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Instead of her usual location in the Frozen Cartographic Tent of Doom, Spymaster Leliana turns out to be in the temple's main hall. If Margo didn't know any better, she would have to assume that Torquemada is actually enjoying a spot of normal human conversation. Her two interlocutors are Mother Giselle — who is indeed sporting some pretty underwhelming Chantry robes (though their plainness pales in comparison with the much more aggressively ugly headdress) — and a new arrival: a statuesque, impeccably dressed woman with closely cropped hair and a stunningly imperious expression.

This, Margo assumes, is the mythical Orlesian mage.

As she makes her way towards the trio — and she's only dragging her feet a little — the mage turns, considers her from under slightly hooded, perfectly highlighted eyelids with an expression that leaves no doubt as to Margo's taxonomic status (a heretofore unknown, yet not particularly interesting species of mold) — and gestures at her. "How fortunate you are here, dear. Run along and fetch me a cup of tea from the kitchens, will you? It is terribly cold in this keep. Oh, and mind you do not oversweeten it." At this, the mage turns to Leliana. "Do your servants take liberties with the sugar as well? I heard this fascinating theory once about the origins of the practice..."

Margo blinks. Right. Do you take one or two spoons of raw class antagonism with your morning coffee?

Torquemada, to Margo's utter shock, has the grace to look a little embarrassed by this. "Court Enchanter Vivienne, please meet one of... my agents." She hesitates for a few seconds, clearly looking for a way to phrase whatever's coming next more diplomatically. "The Inquisition is a military operation, and, as you will see, we deploy our people in accordance with their skills. Of course, plenty of elves are employed in a supporting capacity, but I believe you will find that things are somewhat different from Orlais."

Margo files away this sociopolitical tidbit for future reference. How, exactly, are elves treated in Orlais?

The Iron Lady cocks a delicately tweezed eyebrow. "Of course, my dear. And my apologies, agent, I meant no offense. But surely military customs are not a reason to forego the benefits of civilization entirely? If you wish for the nobility of both countries to accord the Inquisition the attention and deference it is due, it is good to follow some simple principles of, as we say in Orlais, 'comme-il-faut.'"

Torquemada swallows all of that with a mildly soured expression. "Of course, Court Enchanter, you are certainly correct. I hope you will forgive our occasional failures at proper hospitality — we

are, alas, stretched a little thin.” The spymaster gestures at an elven girl in plainclothes at the other end of the colonnade, and orders her to fetch tea. “To the matter at hand, agent. How is your health?”

Margo tries to determine whether this is a trick question. “Much improved, thank you for asking,” she volunteers cautiously.

“Excellent. I am told you have acquitted yourself well in the Hinterlands, despite the accident. Fortunate that Solas has a remarkable facility with healing magic, is it not? A curious skill, for a mage who is not, according to his own testimony, a spirit healer. Of course, Mother Giselle’s assistants will now contribute their expertise as well, for which we are deeply grateful.” Torquemada smiles pleasantly at the clergywoman. Mother Giselle inclines her head in acknowledgement, and the spymaster returns her attention to Margo. “We are hearing troubling news about Avvar unrest in the Fallow Mire, in addition to the reports on the epidemic. I thought an alchemist’s presence would be beneficial, and I cannot, as you can imagine, spare Master Adan.” She pauses. “You leave tomorrow at dawn. Scout Harding will assemble the rest of your patrol. Do consult with Lady Trevelyan, and report to Harding — I can spare whomever the Herald does not need for her own tasks.” Tirade delivered, Torquemada gives her a curt nod, and Margo surmises that she has been dismissed.

The Orlesian mage smiles charmingly. “An excellent idea. Too many idle hands make for a rather uncouth ambiance.”

Margo walks away, humming *The Internationale*.

Fallow Mire. Sounds unpleasant. What was it that Jan was saying yesterday? Dead shit? Who doesn’t love dead shit...

And then, as she exits the temple, she breaks into a huge grin as she spots Varric’s outrageously bright red kaftan right by the requisitions tent.

This means that they’re all back.

Varric spots her almost as quickly. “Prickly! As I live and breathe — and so do you, as it turns out. Should change your nickname to ‘tumbleweed.’”

Margo groans — mostly to suppress the desire to ask Varric about Thedosian plant taxonomies — but the dwarf is already chortling. “I’m just messing with you.” He walks over, and, to Margo surprise, opens his arms wide for a hug. She’s more than happy to oblige, even if the dwarf’s head does only come up to her chest. But the whole operation isn’t too awkward, and soon they are both grinning at each other and slapping each other’s backs. Nothing like surviving necro-slugs and inexplicable ill luck together to make you feel right at home.

“How was Orlais? How’s Evie?” Margo asks, wondering if she can rope the rogue into sharing breakfast before the day’s labors start in earnest.

“Orlais was mostly a cockup,” Varric sighs. He quickly fills her in on the Chantry’s reaction and the bizarre behavior of the Templars. So. The military arm decided to punch the head that wielded it. No surprise there — military arms tend to do that every once in a while.

“Evie is doing well — the kid’s starting to get into the swing of things. And she’s so damn cute that everyone wants to just sort of... fuss over her and ply her with sweets. So, as you’ve seen, we’ve picked up some volunteers.” Varric’s eyes narrow in a sly look. “What do you think of our new troops?”

Margo tells him about her training sessions with Iron Bull, Blackwall, and Sera. The dwarf chuckles at her telegraphic descriptions. “You like the new mage?”

She shrugs. “Hoity-toity, but if she’s effective... I suppose that’s all that matters. What do you think of her?”

“I think it’s good that Chuckles will get a break every once in a while. Evie, though, seems to just adore our new Grande Dame — go figure.” Another ironic look. “Speaking of Chuckles, have you seen him yet?”

Margo shakes her head.

“Well, don’t let me keep you, then. And go catch up with the kid, too. I think she’s been dying to tell someone about Orlais’ latest fashion, and, strictly between us, I’m afraid the Seeker isn’t the best audience for that.”

The kid is in the midst of what appears to be a deeply awkward conversation with Commander Rutherford. Margo pauses, surveying the two from a distance. Oddly enough, most of the awkwardness is emanating from the commander himself — he shuffles in place, rubbing the back of his neck every time Evie asks a question.

When she spots Margo, Evie emits a little squeal — to Cullen’s completely flummoxed expression — and rushes over. Before Margo can say “oof”, Evie’s got her in a bear hug. “You’re fine! You’re really all right! Ahhh! I’m so happy! Solas’s magic is amazing! You’re amazing! You are fine now, right? I can hug you? It doesn’t hurt?”

Margo returns the hug, and they do a side to side shamble, all under General Pauldrons’ increasingly discomfited gaze. For a brief, very ungenerous moment, Margo wonders whether the commander’s discomfort has to do with the social implications of a friendship between a human noble and a random elf underling.

“New perfume?” Margo asks, giving the kid a quick sniff. She smells fancy — musk and ambergris, rose, a hint of star anise. Just the right balance of heady and whimsical. Also, likely expensive. She wonders how Evie got it. A new suitor, perhaps? Or, more likely, a present from the Iron Lady.

“Yes! Margo, Val Royaux is incredible! You should have seen it! You would have loved the buildings, it’s all these soaring structures, but they’re delicate, not like we build in the Free Marches. And the shops, and there are these outdoor... taverns? Inns? Parlours? And people just sit outside and talk about literature, and the arts. And it’s so warm!”

Margo smiles at her. “Maybe next time. Anyway, you’ve been doing really well — good choice on Iron Bull and Blackwall. And Sera.”

Evie beams. “Yes! Iron Bull intimidates me very much, but actually, he’s nice if you talk to him. I mean, he might be nice if you don’t talk to him too. Not like he talks too much beyond, you know, ‘right behind ya, boss,’ but... What was I saying? Oh! And Warden Blackwall is ... well, all right, he kind of intimidates me too, because the beard! But he’s really polite, and he seems like he really cares about helping people.” Margo chokes down a laugh at Evie’s description of the Warden as “polite.” The man swears like a sailor. Although, come to think of it, he does code-switch remarkably well, depending on who he’s talking to. “And Sera... well, Sera’s a little odd, but I like her. I think. Though I can’t always follow what she’s saying because it’s like all her sentences start

with one thing, and end with another. Though I guess I do that too, so..."

"And there's the Court Enchantress... Enchanter?"

"Yes!" Evie beams beatifically. "Isn't Vivienne amazing? She's just so... classy. Composed? Combobulated? That's not a word, is it? And she never talks too much, and everything she says is just right. Unlike me." And at this, Evie giggles, and Margo finds herself unexpectedly happy that the kid no longer seems to be so self-conscious about her verbal mannerisms.

"I saw Varric. How did Cassandra and Solas do on the trip?"

Evie sighs. "Cassandra's really worried and upset about the Templars, because Lord Seeker was a total..." She breaks into a stage whisper. "Asshat! Even though the Chantry was kinda rude too — anyway, everyone was very rude all around. And Solas... I think he sort of likes Val Royaux, but doesn't want to let on." She wrinkles her nose in amusement. "One morning, I spotted him in one of the really fancy bakeries on the upper levels. Did you know Val Royaux has levels? Like a cake? Wait, no, that's not right. Cakes have layers. Anyway. Oh, right, Solas. Bakeries. So when I asked him, he said something really vague, like he was just taking a walk and seeing the sights. But I think he's got a secret sweet tooth!"

Margo suppresses a chuckle — here is to hoping that the warm and fuzzies don't have too obvious a physical manifestation — and winks at Evie. "I wouldn't be all that surprised," she volunteers.

Evie's face turns serious. "You're going off on patrol tomorrow, right? I heard the Fallow Mire is really creepy. You have to be careful, all right?"

Margo nods, and pats the girl on the shoulder. "Don't you worry about me. What about you, what's on your docket?"

At Evie's puzzled expression, Margo quickly rephrases. Wrong colloquialism. "I mean, what's your next step?"

Evie shrugs. "I guess we're going to go to Redcliffe to speak with the mages. Cassandra thinks I could seal the Breach if only we can channel enough power into the mark, so I guess getting the mages on board would make sense. Although... well, there's also the Templars, but I don't see how they'd even want to talk to us, all things considered. I think Commander Cullen would rather have the Templars though." Margo notices that Evie colors slightly at the mention of "Commander Cullen." Uh-oh. Someone might be harboring a little crush. "Do you... Do you happen to know why he hates mages so much? I mean... he really doesn't seem to like them. And... I don't know. Not all mages are bad, right? Solas isn't bad. And Vivienne isn't bad..."

There's something about Evie's downcast expression that makes Margo wonder why Cullen's apparent anti-mage attitude bothers her so much. "I don't know, kiddo. You could just ask him. I'm sure he'd tell you."

Evie's eyes widen. "Oh, no, I couldn't possibly! What if it's really personal?"

Margo smiles. "If it's really personal he'll either tell you as much, or he'll evade, but either way, you won't know until you try to find out."

Evie sighs. "I guess there's no point in coming up with fancy stories in my head about some kind of tragic past, right? It's probably nothing really big. Like, maybe a mage stole his puppy once, or something."

Margo nods encouragingly. "Right. And even if it is serious, then you should find out too. You

want to know about the people you're working with."

"That's true. I'm going to talk to Cassandra about who should be coming to Redcliffe. And then Scout Harding will take everyone else, and you should be very careful, because this Fallow Mire sounds really yucky, and..."

Margo chuckles. It does sound yucky, the kid's absolutely right. "Sounds good. But you make sure you have a good team with you. See what Cassandra says."

"Come by and have some fancy Orlesian tea with me after, when we're all back?"

"I'd love to." They part with one more hug. Evie scampers off, presumably to find the Seeker. Before Margo has the chance to trail back to the apothecary, Rutherford gestures at her.

Now that the kid is out of his immediate orbit, General Shoulderpads seems a lot more at ease. "How goes the training, agent? Have you fully recovered from your fall?"

"Much improved, Commander," Margo smiles politely, leaving her affirmative noises deliberately vague, just in case he decides that her progress rate is suspicious. It buys her a second to observe the fellow. Despite the frigid temperatures, there is a fine sheen of perspiration over his forehead and temples — but he seems too pale for any recent exertion to account for the sweating.

Rutherford catches her looking, and his expression sheds some of its apparent amiability, leaving something hard-edged and cagey in its wake. "Glad to hear it. Don't let me keep you, then." He turns away and stalks off in the direction of a group of recruits.

Margo watches his back for a few seconds. Either General Pauldrons is ill, or he is coming off of something. Perhaps a drinking habit. Since his back offers no answers, she pivots on her heels, and walks back to the apothecary.

She hesitates next to Solas's hut. He is not outside, and the door still seems bolted shut.

Her heart does a hard little thump, and Margo, with an unhappy little "hmpf", forces herself to walk on by. She's not about to go running all around the camp looking for him. Never go running after an elf, or a bus, to paraphrase one of Baba's favorite sayings.

Master Adan is nowhere in sight, but there is a list the length of an arm (and also maybe part of a leg) on the worktable. There are potions for her to take along with them to the Mire, including a batch of formulas that she identifies as anti-infection prophylactics. There are also potions to be made to service Haven's apparently ever expanding needs, and a whole range of lyrium-heavy preparations for Evie's mission to Redcliffe.

Right. No wonder Master Adan's in absentia. This is at least a day's worth of labor. She uses a hefty piece of metal ore — iron, by the looks of it — to prop open Auntie's compendium before settling into the tasks at hand.

By the time she is done with the prophylactics, the sky outside is dark, and Margo is out of powdered spindleweed. She sets a pot of water on the fire — Adan already knows about her amrita-pilfering habit, so no point in stopping now. The plant must contain some kind of stimulant, though Margo isn't entirely sure whether it is caffeine, or something else.

Soon enough, the rhythm of the work absorbs all of her attention.

The knock on the door is drowned out by the clanking of the new ingredient mill. Which is why the stern "hello" that follows startles the living daylights out of her. Margo releases the metal crank

with an undignified yelp and whirls around. “Agh! You scared the hell out of me!”

Solas — because, of course, who else would sneak up on her like he is floating around in a particularly mild-mannered rendition of Nosferatu — extends what is probably meant to be a conciliatory offering. Margo eyes it suspiciously.

The elf is holding a small wooden box, its polished top shimmering with condensation. “I had to keep them cool while on the road, in particular since our travels took longer than I had anticipated.”

“What is this?” Margo asks cautiously. The only thing she can think of that might require deep freezing is the unpleasant remains of an equally unpleasant creature, likely to be used in combination with “some fungus” to unexpected — and unpleasant — effects.

Solas lifts an eyebrow. “Have you forgotten your request, lethallan?”

Margo tries to remember when she requested unpleasant creaturely remains. She blinks. And then it hits. “You didn’t *actually* get me éclairs, did you?”

Solas purses his lips, but the effort to hide the smile is not entirely successful, and it settles in his eyes instead.

There is something so delightfully pedestrian about the fact that he had to keep the damn pastries refrigerated, even if he did so with magic, that Margo breaks into a fit of completely undignified giggles. The elf observes her newfound hilarity with quiet amusement. She takes the box from him and sets it on the desk, before peeling off her work gloves and walking over to the hearth.

“Tea?” she offers. “The water should still be hot.”

Solas looks inexplicably chagrined by this proposal. “Thank you, but no. Though I appreciate the thought.”

“What do *you* pair with pastries? Don’t tell me you eat them as is.”

“Hot water will suffice.”

Margo shrugs. “Suit yourself. Well, don’t just loom there, take a seat.”

He lowers himself into one of the chairs. Margo pours hot water into a set of mismatched receptacles and plops a few dessicated amrita flowers into her own cup. She hands the other one to the elf, and settles across from him. “How did Orlais go?”

“As well as one might have expected. The Chantry and the Templars are too busy bickering to spare us more than a passing thought, although the rebel mages in Redcliffe seem willing to negotiate.”

Margo frowns. “These are the same rebel mages that are fighting with the Templars in the Hinterlands?”

“No. Those in Redcliffe are organized. Or as organized as they can be under the circumstances.”

Margo eyes the box. “May I?”

Solas inclines his head with a polite “certainly,” so she pries open the lid. “Macarons! Ok, not éclairs, but you found me macarons!”

Does this mean they have almonds in Thedas? Pistachios?

Solas looks both pleased and surprised at the implied culinary convergence. “Do you have something similar in your world?”

Margo extracts a pink, perfectly circular pastry, and pops the whole thing into her mouth. She nods as she chews. “Yup.” It comes out a little muffled. “They are almost identical. Though I wouldn’t have thought to put a spice into the filling. It’s got a bit of a bite to it, doesn’t it?”

He nods. “I am quite fond of the spice, actually. It is a nice surprise against the sweetness of the dough, no?” He lifts one of the green ones from the box and bites into it.

The next half a minute is spent chewing. “Thank you. This was... thoughtful of you. I was partially joking about dragging back baked goods all the way from Orlais.” She does feel a little guilty about it, come to think of it.

Solas smiles. “To watch you enjoy them was certainly worth the effort. Ah... you have...” He gestures at her, but when she fails to interpret whatever his hand movements are meant to convey, he leans in, and, after a brief hesitation, sweeps his thumb across her lower lip. “A crumb,” he offers by way of an explanation.

Margo summarily ignores the sudden heat in her cheeks — and the elf’s faux innocent look — in favor of another macaron. When in doubt, eat pastries.

“You are slated to leave for the Fallow Mire tomorrow, are you not?” Solas inquires.

That gets the warm and fuzzies to behave, and quickly. “Yes. I hear it’s unpleasant.”

“It is. Avvar tribes aside, an epidemic has devastated the region, and in the absence of anyone to burn the dead...” He trails off.

“What happens if you don’t burn the dead?” Margo has the sneaking suspicion that “dead shit” is about to take a foray into truly exceptional unpleasantness.

“In places where the Veil is thin, spirits might attempt to cross it. They latch onto the dead in their effort to join the physical world.” His expression turns grim. “A flawed arrangement that benefits neither spirit nor those still living.”

Margo almost chokes on her tea. “Let me get this straight. They turn corpses into zombies?”

“I am not familiar with this term. What is its meaning?”

Now is probably not the time to explain the colonial history of the concept, so Margo sets her cup aside, sudden queasiness gripping her stomach. Just like Thedas to have zombies on its roster of nastiness. “You know — shambling, groaning, eating brains?”

“Perhaps not all three, though similar in principle.” His mouth is set in a grim line. “Which is why I am coming with you, provided the Herald is willing to spare me.”

“Wouldn’t you be needed in Redcliffe?”

Solas avails himself of another cake — somehow the topic of zombies doesn’t seem to be spoiling his appetite. “Court Enchanter Vivienne is undoubtedly much better suited for the kind of politicking that will be required at Redcliffe. And I have asked the Herald to give me a leave of absence for the next mission, now that we are able to afford it.”

The whole prospect of traipsing through “dead shit and Avvars” suddenly seems less bleak.

“There is the other matter, however,” Solas suddenly adds, his face serious. “Your issue with Imshael. We cannot leave it as is.”

Margo schools her features into something approximating polite neutrality. Their casual banter is easy and pleasant enough, but there is the constant backdrop of unacknowledged complexity, just out of view, like an iceberg in dark waters. The memory of the imperfect doppelgänger makes her skin crawl. “It seems to have taken an interest,” she finally volunteers. “Hell if I know why.”

“What face did it choose this time, lethallan?”

Her effort at neutrality is truly heroic. “Same old, same old.”

Solas’s nostrils flare, but he keeps his expression in check otherwise. He stands abruptly, and begins to pace. “The first step is to return your memories. While I fear this may not solve the larger problem, it is still the correct course of action, and it is my hope that it will allow you to become less noticeable to other spirits.”

Margo nods. Whatever maximizes her chances against the demon. “Are there other things we might do?” she asks.

He doesn’t respond right away. Instead, he settles back into his chair and looks at her with a troubled expression. At length, he nods. “There is...” He pauses. The echoes of the now familiar internal conflict play out beneath the carefully crafted neutral mask. “There are,” he corrects “two possible solutions.”

Margo gestures in encouragement. Solas gives her another one of his long, inscrutable looks before turning away, as if suddenly preoccupied with some arcane alchemical ingredient on the shelf. She doesn’t think it’s the bag of nug droppings that’s got him so fascinated, however.

“To understand, you must learn more about spirits. The nature of the Fade is different from the waking side. Unlike physical beings, spirits are defined by what they are, and not by what they do. Because the Fade responds to the waking world’s intentions, a spirit’s essence is fragile. Therefore, an alteration is neither simple change, nor, should it go poorly, a correctable misstep. The spirit’s previous form ceases to be and what arises in its stead is different.”

Margo frowns, trying to follow the trail of his explanation. So, for spirits, identity is defined not through behavior, but through something else — what the elf calls essence. Some type of ontological status. “So what defines a spirit is a kind of fundamental intent, maybe? Or a collection of intents?”

Solas’s eyebrows shoot up, as if he hadn’t expected her to arrive to this conclusion quite so easily. He nods once. “That is as close to the heart of the matter as I can explain, yes.”

Interesting. Margo turns the new model over in her head. This would mean that in the Fade, one would have a very different theory of mind, because presumably one could access intent directly if one knew where — or how — to look. “So how can one recognize this... defining intent?”

“Mages do this all the time when they transact with spirits. It is possible to be misled, of course, since the Fade helps the mind reconcile what it perceives as paradoxes. As you are not a mage, you cannot reach out to a spirit in the same way as I would. But I could reach out to you such that you might identify me with a degree of certainty.”

A Fade caller ID. “Excellent. This sounds like a solid approach to me.”

There is a tell-tale tightness in his jaw. “This is not something I would wish to undertake lightly.” He appears ill at ease, as if he is trying to will himself into an emotional shape that no longer fits him comfortably. “There is another, arguably simpler solution. And likely the wiser one.” He hesitates again, but, at this point, Margo can make an educated guess as to where this is going, and she has absolutely no intention of making it easier for him. “Our... association. I would not wish for it to end in tragedy. It is not too late to step back. No harm has been done.”

Margo offers him her best “skeptical academic” look. “Wait a second. Do you mean to tell me — after we just went over how the nature of spirits is something rooted in *being*, rather than in *doing* — that this ancient desire demon or whatever the hell it is is going to simply desist because... what? We pretend we don’t know each other? Nothing to see here, move along?”

He frowns. “If there is nothing for it to exploit...” And at that moment, he looks to Margo almost as naïve as his unfinished utterance suggests.

“Solas.” She smiles around a sudden pang of sadness, redirecting her gaze to her cup. “These things... don’t work that way. At least not for me.” Apparently, as far as the elf is concerned, it’s brutal intellectual honesty, or bust. In for a penny... “Emotions aren’t weeds. You can’t just rip them out, roots and all, and toss them on the compost pile. And even if I could, what would remain... would not be the same as before. You pluck out a plant, and the shape it took is left behind.” She ventures a glance. There is an odd intensity to his expression, but beyond that, she cannot read him. Margo sighs. “If Imshael is what he is — a spirit that latches onto people’s desires, broadly defined — then why would he change course? Would he not simply adapt his strategy, exploit whatever new opening arises?” She leans forward. “Solas, that thing... It seems to understand every little nuance. Or insecurity. I’m not even sure that it is evil, in the simplest sense of the term. It almost feels like it wants what anyone wants: that its ‘target’, if that is the appropriate term, might make the choice with full awareness.” She pauses, trying to formulate her thoughts without devolving into moral absolutes. “I don’t even know if its toying is meant maliciously. That it would harm me, in the end, isn’t necessarily its purpose, but that doesn’t change the likely outcome.” She lets her gaze drift to the work station — the memory of the other “Solas” a sudden, vivid nightmare. “And I think it’s learning. If something isn’t done, one day I might not be able to tell the difference — to know it from you.”

“I... see.” There is a change to the elf’s expression, as if a crucial insight finally dawns on him. “And since you do not have full control of yourself in the Fade... If we...” Solas swallows. “There might be a time when you might not wish to draw that distinction,” he concludes, expression utterly horrified. “Oh, da’nas.” Almost a plea. “With enough time, perhaps it will lose interest.” He pauses. “Or you will.”

Margo exhales quietly, trying to slow down her rushing heartbeat. She doesn’t have “enough time.” But she can’t force him. If this is what will help him sleep better at night, then she supposes she can’t fault him. “Is this what you want? To walk away? In all honesty.”

He meets her gaze. Opens his mouth to respond. Hesitates. And then looks like he’s being ripped asunder from the inside, and Margo feels for him, but she does not retract her question. It is not her place to try to sway him one way or another. His side of the decision does not belong to her.

Solas lets out a quiet breath. “It is what I should want.” And then, a lot firmer. “However, it is not.” For a brief moment, his lips quirk in a rueful, surprised little smile, as if he suddenly realizes that his mouth is not fully following orders from headquarters. He recovers quickly. “We will take the other route, then. But I must meet you in the Fade for that.”

Margo clasps her hands in her lap, trying to will the slight tremor away. Damn sweaty palms. She

has one more request. They are not out of tricky waters, as far as she can tell. One iceberg, coming right up. “Solas, I do not trust myself in the Fade right now. I have some facility with entering it, but very little control. Dreams always seem to help the mind gloss over the paradoxes and contradictions, as you said yourself.” She orders the impending fit of vapors to kindly fuck off. Ok. She can do this. Out with it. “I would want an added layer of security, as it were.”

“What are you asking, lethallan?” And when she checks his expression, Margo almost laughs, because he clearly doesn’t have the slightest idea where she’s going with this.

“For you to be able to wake me up if something goes wrong.”

He seems confused at that. “I can easily wake us both from the Fade...”

She shakes her head and stifles a frustrated groan. She’s being a child again. This shouldn’t be so difficult. “Not if I get lost somewhere. You need to be able to wake me up from this side too.”

The realization dawns on him. Solas looks... flummoxed? A little scandalized? Plain old nervous? Difficult to tell... “Didn’t you mention you sleep in old ruins? Am I seriously a worse alternative to giant spiders?”

That gets him out of his embarrassment, and he chuckles quietly. “If you leave something for the spiders, they are usually content to leave you in peace,” he trails, and it’s definitely... playful. So they somehow managed to get on safer emotional terrain. Yippee ki-yay.

“Should have gotten me more pastries, then,” Margo grins.

Solas’s smile reaches all the way to his eyes — and then it dissolves under the weight of some other, graver thought. He looks out of the window. “If we are to do this, it would be preferable if we are not interrupted by your perennially inebriated mentor or Enchanter Minaeve’s questionable experiments with spirit remains. Or whatever else they might be doing.”

Margo snorts. She was pretty sure that Adan and Minaeve were an item. Always vindicating when your suspicions are shared.

“Come then. It is late, and I suspect tomorrow’s departure will be an early one.”

The butterflies in her stomach make a roaring comeback worthy of a dragon. Margo tells them to kindly fuck off too.

Solas stands up. Margo closes the now empty box of pastries, rinses the cups, and returns them to the shelf. And then she follows the elf out of the apothecary.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Thomas Aquinas, whose meditation on being and essence I am playing with/butchering here.

Next up: Fade shenanigans

Strange Bedfellows

Chapter Summary

In which Margo gets her memories back

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The house is still chilly and damp from lack of regular heating over the past two weeks, so Margo helps Solas get the fireplace started. The cabin is poorly insulated — strangely shoddy craftsmanship, as if built by people who were not expecting winter — and the wood in the logpile is heavy with moisture. She spends some time selecting the dryer branches for kindling. The elf is oddly quiet, but the silence isn't altogether oppressive — just a tad tense. He starts the fire with a twitch of his digits, but the logs hiss and take time to catch. They crouch side by side, Margo feeding the little flame with the more resinous slivers she could locate — a local pine, perhaps, sweet-scented, the wood a creamy, fine-grained yellow. The pearls of resin caught in the flaky bark sizzle and crackle, and she watches them bubble and dissipate.

“Would you prefer the outside, or the wall side?”

Margo looks up, startled at the unexpected question. Its utterly mundane content catches her off guard and wrestles a choked little chuckle out of her. Solas's face, in profile, remains unreadable, but without the severity of his irascible edge. She schools her own features into a more or less convincing rendition of reserved civility. This is a little awkward, and probably not just for her.

“I personally like the wall side, but whatever you're more comfortable with. It's your bed, you call the shots.” She winces. That came out rather more ambiguous than intended, so Margo straightens and turns around, pretending to be fascinated with the stunningly ugly painting on one of the walls. Who is this shriveled up, comically evil looking dude? And who on earth thought of painting him? And why is there a portrait of him in every other house in Haven?

“Is that an offer?” Solas asks quietly, and the joke sounds like it's only three quarters one.

Margo clears her throat. The warm and fuzzies rear their ugly head. She tries her best to shove them back wherever they came from. Now is not the time to play cute. “Within reasonable limits,” she offers finally, and stifles an irritated groan. What is *wrong* with her? She isn't even *trying* to flirt, but apparently, there is no helping it.

“Such as?” Of course, he'd go there.

“No tickling,” Margo states firmly.

At length, procrastinating with the fireplace is no longer a tenable strategy. Margo pulls off her jacket and hangs it on the back of a chair with an intense feeling of *déjà vu*. Solas makes a casual little gesture that seems to mean “make yourself at home.” She climbs on the bed, and settles herself all the way against the wall. Solas, in the meantime, gathers a thin woolen blanket from a shelf and lays it over her. Margo huddles into it, but the wood at her back radiates frost, the wintry air leaking through the poorly fitted boards. Maybe there's a rug they might hang over the wall in

lieu of proper insulation.

Solas sits on the bed, his movements a tad abrupt. Eventually, his own reserves of procrastination run out, and he reclines gingerly, looking every bit as uncomfortable as one might expect considering their predicament.

Margo spreads the blanket over them both — she's not sure about the elf, but falling asleep while trying to stop her teeth from rattling with the cold isn't exactly in her skillset. *Just* the cold. Nothing to see here, move along.

A few minutes of very awkward bed sharing ensue. And then Margo decides that this is just plain silly — and she really is inhumanly cold anyway — and maneuvers herself a little closer to her strange bedfellow. She turns to face the wall, her back against his side, and tucks her end of the blanket around herself. Behind her, Solas is so perfectly still she isn't entirely sure he is breathing.

“Do you know how Haven was built, by any chance?” Margo asks in a bid to talk over the awkwardness. “Because I noticed the houses aren't made for winter.”

It seems to snap him out of his torpor, but instead of making things easier, it just makes them worse. Solas shifts closer, apparently deciding that her query is a circuitous critique of his lodging, and thus a complaint about his hospitality. His chest presses against her back. He brings one arm around her — a loose embrace over the coarse blanket, but Margo's heartbeat picks up anyway. His thighs brush against the back of her legs, and it is Margo's turn to freeze.

“The same way as most things, I imagine — with the hands of those who will gain no benefit and will see little gold from the fruits of their labor.”

Despite her rather distracted state, Margo manages a snort.

“Something amuses you, lethallan?”

“For a moment, you reminded me of an influential thinker from my world. Less bearded, though.”

“Is a beard obligatory?”

Margo frowns at the wall. Wait a damn second. Is this a joke about the necessity of facial hair for engaging in philosophical thought, or is he asking her whether she prefers clean-shaven men?

When in doubt, obfuscate. “Only if you plan to start a revolution. Though there were exceptions.”

It earns her a somewhat dry chuckle. “I shall keep this in mind.”

They lie still for a few moments. This close, she notices his scent — ozone, and the faint hint of wood smoke and pine.

“Sleep, *letha'laim*,” Solas whispers into her hair.*

Right. Sleep. She closes her eyes, with absolutely no hope of falling asleep any time soon. And yet, before she knows it, they are both in the Fade.

It would appear that she is the one setting the décor of the dream, because they are back to the field of wild summer grasses, and she watches Solas inhale with obvious pleasure. The meadow smells of sagewort and honeysuckle, of hot earth and distant thunderstorms.

“You have a sensory way of dreaming, da' nas,” he comments.

That's curious. She has wondered before at the strong textures of her Fade dreams — even though the setting is so often familiar, the subtle details do seem richer than in her 'old' dreamworld. "Should we start with the memories, then?"

He nods.

It is similar to their original ill-fated ritual, but from this side, everything is much easier. They stand side by side, as he molds the dream to reenact the lost fragments of her past.

Solas smiles as they watch her PhD advisor hand her former dark-haired avatar his book. "You have remained a scholar," he comments, approvingly.

She blushes through her first kiss, because, of course, at this age — and seen from a third person perspective — it looks painfully awkward. She shoots her companion a quick glance, but he has a rather soft smile on his face. "A lucky boy. I wonder if he knew that," he says, his face in profile. And then his expression becomes serious, and he takes hold of her hand.

The scenery changes.

They watch. She hadn't realized just how much their first ritual had extracted from her.

A young marriage — holy hell, were they really that young? Barely kids themselves, about Evie's age. They didn't feel young at the time. She looks at Ivan, a simple, plain, handsome face that has somehow faded from her memory over the years. He is terribly earnest, ready to tackle life. A baby. Pure joy on Baba's face as she holds the swaddled bundle. Lots of knitting of baby socks, and baby hats, and ridiculous fuzzy blankets with comical animals.

And then the doctor visits. First steps. First words. Sleepless nights. As it unfolds, the memory clicks into a place inside her she didn't know stood vacant. A diagnosis, then another. Writing term papers by the light of a single gas lamp. Second opinions, and third ones. A congenital condition, rare, with no research behind it, and no support in their rural area — a periphery of a periphery. The specialized hospital is a far ride, on bad roads. They do it anyway, over and over and over. Finances stretch — two students' pittances. Uncle Janos helps. Baba too, as much as she can with her pension. Ivan quits university for a simple job. *"I'd rather be working with my hands."* It's not enough. And, inevitable in the end, a little grave, and fresh hyacinth flowers because they were Lily's favorites. *"Forgive me, my soul."* Baba, rocking Margo's shaking, sobbing form back and forth. Baba who herself has buried all but one of her children. *"Sometimes, the roots are shallow, then even the little herbs can't hold them down."* Ivan, drinking, drifting. Screaming in her face in blind, enraged helplessness. Drinking more. Hollowing out. Packing for the city, a different life with no reminders. Gone. And then, as if it is happening to someone else, a letter of acceptance into a language exchange program, a continent away. A new life, a new path. Jake joins her, too — leaving Baba behind. In a year, the dragon's got him. An expiring visa, and a last-ditch bid to extend it with a graduate school application. She stares at the acceptance letter. Phone calls that cost too much and connect only half the time. Standing in line at the consulate. Too old to travel, too old to get an entry visa. Overwrought bureaucracies. A drain on the system. Still, they try. Baba's laughter, like leaves rustling on an Autumn wind, echoing down the wires. *"My roots are here, little thistle. This is where we return. You will be back."*

She notices the tears only when they turn into sobs, vaguely shocked that Solas has carried this for her, in all its precious, wrenching details, without spilling a single drop. The memory fits perfectly. And then she is pressed against his chest, the elf's arms around her, and he is whispering something in Elvhen into her hair, but her inherited linguistic knowledge doesn't stretch far enough to interpret the words.

Margo rubs the tears away, and then, rather gracelessly, wipes the snot off with her sleeve, but at this point, details, right?

“Thank you. For carrying this for me.”

He nods solemnly.

They finish the other memories — most of them simpler, shorter, and bitter-sweet. By the end of it, she feels different — not exactly whole or complete, but sort of filled in, like a piece of Emmental cheese that got turned into something denser, and with fewer bubbles.

She looks at her companion, but he seems calm, a careful guide. Virgil to her Dante, once again.

“Is this tiring?” she asks.

“No. These memories wanted to go to the source. It was an easy process.”

She notices his hesitation. “You’re not so sure about the next step, though, are you?”

He looks at her then. “It...” He clears his throat. Tries again. “It is not part of normal interaction outside of the Fade, and I have never attempted it with someone who is not a typical spirit.”

Margo notices the careful way he phrased that. She frowns. It isn’t an incorrect way of mapping her — neither fully this, nor that.

“Be that as it may, this is the only way to ensure that Imshael will not confuse you in the future, should he attempt another visit. And perhaps...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence, and she doesn’t press, sorely tempted though she is. Solas shakes his head and turns to her. “Let us proceed.”

Margo nods, anxiety pooling in the pit of her stomach. This better not backfire spectacularly. Fucking rituals. She hates rituals. A pox on all of them.

Solas rests his hands on the sides of her neck, fingers gentle and a little cool on her nape, and brings their foreheads together. “I believe it would be easier if you closed your eyes.”

She does.

At first, there is nothing. But then... a strange echo, though not one she hears with her ears. Like the ephemeral apprehension of, say, a plant’s flavor as the window to its pharmaceutical potency, to knowing its very nature. This is similar, though perceived through a sense Margo can’t quite identify, let alone localize. A whirlwind of impressions, fleeting, and hard to commit to memory, yet immediately recognizable once encountered anew — pride; sorrow; anger, ancient and scabbed over. An abstract, complicated, wistful kind of empathy that is almost too painful to endure. Humor. Curiosity. A quiet, contemplative resignation. And underneath it all a profound loneliness that knows no name or solution.

“Oh,” she gasps, eyes flying open. “Solas...” But behind the swirl of qualia that make up his essence, fundamental ontological difference...

The realization crashes into her like a freight train, though what the hell does any of it mean, exactly? But there is something there, she’s sure of it, an intimate, familiar kind of mismatch. As if he’s not quite of his body either, though it fits him better than hers does.

She peers into his eyes, trying to catch the fleeting insight before it vanishes, and suddenly realizes that they are standing very very close to each other.

“Are you... You’re not...”

But before she can quite capture the idea, a kind of anxious anguish flashes across his features, and then he covers her mouth with his, and she loses her train of thought.

The kiss is soft, and sweet, and a little out of practice. At first.

After a few long moments, he pulls away, and the echoes of another private internal struggle play out on his face — one more invisible battle fought and lost. “Would you know me now, *letha’laim*?” he asks, voice a little rough, and she can’t help but wonder at the polyvalence of the question, like he is asking several complicated things at once, and not just whether she might be able to tell him apart from Imshael.

“Always,” she replies around a lump in her throat.

And then, with an impatient little sound that bears a suspicious resemblance to a growl, he pulls her against him and dips her into another kiss, and this one is deep, and greedy, and with absolutely nothing unpracticed about it.

And it also settles her curiosity about whether or not he might be Ok with tongue.

Eventually, they come apart again, but this time, it is much harder to slow down the momentum. She watches as his expression takes on a distinctly regretful cast, even though his eyes keep returning to her lips. “I... Forgive me. It was impulsive. I should not have ...”

“I know exactly what you’re up to, elf,” she exhales, still trying to catch her breath.

Whatever stormy, self-tortured trajectory he was embarking upon, it is replaced by a confused frown. “Oh?”

She wags a finger at him. “One should not use kisses as a distracting tactic.”

“Hmm. Ah... Why not? Does it not work?” And now, there is definitely humor in the question. But also genuine, slightly vexed curiosity, and she has to suppress a fit of impending hilarity.

Margo shoots him a narrowed-eye look instead. “Of course it works.” He seems... well, quite pleased with himself, she supposes. “However,” she lifts a finger. “This is a temporary solution at best.”

Solas, damn him, smirks cheekily — but at least he’s forgotten about his earlier intent to backpedal in panic. After a second hesitation, he lets his arms encircle her waist, and then tugs her back against himself.

“Perhaps for the effects to take hold it requires repetition?”

She’s about to answer, when the world shudders, and careens out of view.

With a jolt, Margo opens her eyes. Only to come face to face with the aforementioned elf.

“Well? Does it?” he asks, and then, with a motion that has no right to be quite so effortless, scoops her up and rolls her over him.

Ah, it's like that, is it? Margo lifts up on her forearms to get a better look at him. "Isn't this way better than a giant spider?"

She feels his chuckle against her ribcage. "Perhaps." His hands, at this point, are set on a tentatively exploratory path down her back.

"Oh, really? If there's something you want to share about how you feel about giant spiders, now's the time."

A loud banging on the door shakes the hut to its foundations. It sounds distinctly impatient. Aha. So that's what woke them up in the first place. She's going to kill whoever it is. Although, judging by Solas's expression, he might beat her to it.

"Come on, you two." You two? Uh-oh. Varric. Well, Margo supposes it could have been worse. Could have been Cassandra. Now that would have been awkward.

"Prickly, if you're in there — and if I were a betting man, I'd say you are — you really want to report to Leliana right about now. Something went tits up in the Mire. Again. They're looking for you everywhere, the patrol has to leave right away." The sound of creaking snow, and a soft curse that involves 'Maker's hairy balls,' 'elves,' and some kind of comparison to 'nugs.' Whatever it is, it causes Solas to color and gently roll her back to the mattress with an embarrassed kind of groan. Margo concludes that "nugs" are the equivalent of "rabbits," and that Varric has arrived to a rather Malthusian conclusion. "Chuckles, you're scheduled with us too. Come on. We gotta get moving."

Chapter End Notes

*Translation:

letha'laim = lethal (kin) + laim (lost). So, either "lost kin" or "fellow lost one" (or, likely, both)

This chapter was brought to you by Marx's beard and Varric's impeccable timing.

Next up: the Foul Mire

Bog Standard

Chapter Summary

Where Margo discusses literature, goes to see the sights against her will, and gets a dream visit from her not particularly nice new friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Andraste’s Silky Knickers, I have no idea why places like this exist. This shit’s ruining my boots,” Varric grumbles, scraping off an unidentified stinky mess from the sole of his shoe. “I don’t think we’ve seen the sun in... how many days has it been?”

“Only two, Varric. But I will grant you that this is... awful.” Cassandra is crouching next to a makeshift fire pit that just won’t catch in the constant freezing drizzle despite her best efforts.

The local deity-forsaken marsh is an unfortunate blend of peat bog and floodplain, cold, inhospitable, and utterly miserable. Margo decides to re-christen it to The Foul Mire. As far as she is concerned, the two days they’ve been trudging through it is enough for a lifetime. Possibly several.

The dwarf spends a few seconds observing Cassandra’s attempts to ignite the little pile of damp kindling with an expression of truly epic disgust, and then, with a theatrical sigh, he starts assembling a shelter for the fire pit out of some sticks and tent felt. “How’d you even end up with us, Seeker? I thought you’d be going to Redcliffe with the Herald. Where it’s nice, warm, and doesn’t rain corpses.”

Cassandra makes a discouraged noise under her breath. “Blackwall and the Iron Bull suggested that we should make the selection of assignments more equitable.”

That gets Varric chortling. “They made you draw straws, didn’t they?”

“Yes.” Delivered with the righteous indignation of the unjustly maligned.

“What about you, Chuckles, how’d you get stuck with this?”

Margo glances up from her work. Varric is giving Solas, who is crouching under the meager shelter of a rocky overhang, a rather amused look.

Varric smirks. “Wrong place, wrong time?”

“It would appear so,” the elf responds dryly, and returns to the task of gazing abstractedly into the middle distance.

Margo stifles a sigh before rerouting her attention to the task of peeling blood lotus. Of course, they are all in a foul mood, but this is becoming a tad ridiculous. If one only considers the horrid, stinky, sticky mess of the mire, the constant rain, and the bone-deep chill that feels like it belongs in a crypt, this would already make for a thoroughly unpleasant experience. Add to all this the fact that the place is crawling with not just dead, but undead shit, and that she has to examine said

undead shit after it's been laid to rest — or, more accurately, for a short, restorative nap — to bring “samples” back to Enchanter Minaeve (may she contract an embarrassing skin disease), and you get thoroughly unpleasant on steroids. And to top it all off, the elf, nothing if not mercurial, has apparently decided to backtrack in terror-stricken panic and is ...

What is he doing, exactly?

It isn't that he is ignoring her or giving her the cold shoulder per se. Margo huddles deeper into her coat, trying to regain at least a bit of warmth. Rather, he is being studiously formal. Pleasantly formal, but formal nonetheless. As well as assiduously avoiding all eye contact. And to add insult to injury, Varric has decided — with truly enviable dedication — to drop innuendo-laden remarks, to which Solas responds with caustic irritation. So, by and large, all of this is miles away from where they had landed a week ago.

Kiss? What kiss. No such thing.

It shouldn't chafe quite this much, and Margo scolds herself for taking it so personally — and then scolds herself for scolding herself because it is entirely unrealistic to think you can pull a Munchausen and extract yourself by your own bootstraps out of an emotional quagmire. Speaking of bogs.

She should know better. She saw it coming, really, the second it had become clear that Varric was onto them and had made erroneous, though not altogether unfounded assumptions.

Never run after an elf, or a bus. Baba's wise suggestion should, apparently, be extended to the undead. Because a) the undead will run after you, and b) there will, in fact, be another undead if you wait for five minutes, and it's going to bring its buddies with it.

Margo stares at the pile of reeds in front of her. More blood lotus means more fire grenades. More fire grenades means more roasted undead. Since roasted undead are preferable to undercooked undead — as those tend to run around and shoot rotten, squishy arrows at you — peeling blood lotus is a task that benefits all living beings. (Undead excluded.) Right. She's got a job to do, which does not involve wasting emotional labor on something that may or may not be a... something. Since calling it a “relationship” at this stage would be a vast hyperbole, “something” will have to do.

At least no Avvar, as of yet. Maybe they decided they didn't like the place either, and left.

“Harding and Bordelon have been gone for too long. I do not like this.” Cassandra has finally managed to start the fire, and their trio huddles around the flames. Even Solas abandons his rocky shelter and migrates closer to the fire pit. He sits on the opposite side — as far away from Margo as is possible while still benefiting from the meager heat.

Margo picks up a blood lotus stem and begins to pull the fibers apart, letting the filaments drop into a travel-sized cast-iron pot. Of course, blood lotus is no lotus at all — morphologically, it is similar to the *scripus* genus, except for the rather wild assemblage of psychotropic and combustive properties. The roots, though, are starchy, and, according to Harding, edible.

“Don't worry, Seeker. Harding will be back with dinner before you know it.”

“That actually worries me. I am not sure what would be considered edible in this Maker forsaken marsh. We should have rationed the provisions more carefully.”

As if the words summoned them, Margo hears quiet, squishy footsteps a few seconds before

Harding and Jan emerge with a mid-sized animal carcass. The creature in question looks like the product of a night of passion between a pig and an armadillo.

They plop it down a few yards from the pit, and Harding digs into it with her knife with quick efficiency. Bad News makes his way to the fire and crouches by Margo. He stares at her bounty of reeds in weary disgust. “More of this blighted thing, huh. Thought we’d be done with it, but no.” He picks a peeled plant from the pot, and sniffs it. “So is it true? This stuff will make you see things? And it explodes?”

Margo takes the reed back. “The flowering parts, in high concentration, are apparently hallucinogenic.” If the little anecdote about some Orlesian chamberlain in Auntie’s book is true, and not simply an apocryphal story about the decadent stupidity of courtiers. “The stems do extract into something that’ll blow up. Nifty, hmm?”

“Wait, wait...” Varric perks up. “Is that the one where the Orlesian noblewoman tried to take a bite out of a statue? That was blood lotus?”

Margo nods. Varric’s expression slowly morphs from speculative to alarmingly devious. “You know, Prickly, it just occurred to me... I might need a consult. I’m thinking of incorporating a subplot into a story I’m writing, and I need an alchemist’s opinion.”

Oh no. This cannot possibly go anywhere good.

“You are writing a new story? Is it... a sequel to an existing story?” Cassandra looks like she’s trying very hard — and utterly failing — to broadcast polite, but neutral interest. Except, there is absolutely nothing neutral about it: it’s hopeful, and maybe even a little greedy. Hmm. Margo wonders which of Varric’s books the Seeker is hooked on. Perhaps the crime series? Apparently, that one is quite popular, and Margo has been considering procuring it for herself. Maybe Varric has some copies he’d be willing to share.

“Sadly, no, Seeker. My editor’s pushing me to do another romance serial, though it’s not really my genre.”

Cassandra seems to get a little flustered at this. Margo shoots Solas a quick glance, just to see if he noticed as well. Their eyes meet briefly — apparently, he had a similar thought — but he quickly averts his gaze.

With a neutrally pleasant expression.

“I hear your other books are very popular, Varric. I am sure there would be an audience for a romance series — perhaps in Orlais.” Aha. Suspicion confirmed. The warrior princess likes her romance novels. To each their vice.

“The problem, Seeker,” and at this Varric casts Margo a sarcastic little glance “is that my editor actually likes my trashy stuff. You know, the sort of thing the Rowdy Dowager reviews. I told her it’s not my thing — my one stab at it didn’t even sell that well — but she says she wants me to try again. Void if I know why.”

This time Margo’s pretty sure Cassandra blushes. Solas suffers a sudden coughing fit. Jan grins.

What is this business with the Rowdy Dowager exactly? Wait... Does Varric write erotica?

“So. Prickly. I’m not one to say no to my editor — dangerous business, that — and I need a plot that makes up for the bad sales. So I was thinking — a torrid affair between a bookish alchemist and a mage, set against the backdrop of some cataclysmic event.”

“The mage is a secret Tevinter agent, right?” Jan chortles with a suggestive eyebrow wag at Margo.

Varric adopts a thoughtful expression that, to Margo, seems about as real as a shopping mall Santa. At this point, she has a good idea about where this train is headed. The effort it takes to avoid glancing at Solas would put Hercules to shame.

Right. She is going to kill the dwarf. Put a laxative into his stew — and some rashvine leaves into his personal necessities satchel.

“Anyway, elf stories are really popular these days. Elfie shit sells like hot cakes, I believe were my editor’s words. So I’m thinking, spunky female protagonist, and the male love interest is an elusive, brooding elven apostate — because who doesn’t like a broody elf, right? But my editor — terrifying woman, runs a whole Coterie by herself — tells me that the genre doesn’t call for much plot, as it were. So here I am, supposed to make them fall into bed in the first chapter. But I’m a writer, not a miracle worker, and I do have a reputation to uphold. So I need some kind of... device. Hence the consult, Prickly. As our resident alchemist, give me a plausible alchemical formula to speed up the process. Was going to ask Adan, but then I thought *you* might have a better idea.”

Hell in a sack, forget the laxative — time to get herself acquainted with the poisons section.

“But wait... Varric. That would be... terrible! There would be no... anticipation! No mounting tension!” That’s Cassandra, sounding truly scandalized by the demands of the genre.

Margo, at this point, would very much like to be swallowed into the earth, though come to think of it, it’s a bit crowded, what with all the undead shits. Maybe she can trade places with one.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Harding, done with dismantling the carcass, is depositing chunks of fresh meat into a stew pot. She adds a few of the blood lotus roots for good measure. Here is to hoping they won’t all end up with some collective hallucination as a result of the scout’s questionable culinary decisions — reality is bad enough as it is. “I don’t always mind it when it skips to the chase. Varric, did you say it’s set against some kind of catastrophe? People don’t always have the time for a long courtship. Sometimes you just need to get it out of your system — might be dead tomorrow.”

“But why do they ingest the drought in the first place?” That’s Cassandra again, not satisfied with the proposed plot device, her brow furrowed in skeptical puzzlement. “Oh! Does the alchemist seduce the mage? Perhaps he rebukes her, and she slips the draught to him in secret?” The Seeker’s frown deepens. “Though that would be unethical. I would not find such a protagonist appealing — if I read such things, that is. Though, perhaps, it is a love triangle? Is the mage interested in someone else?”

Bad News leans in, props his chin on his fist, and turns to Margo with a dazzling grin. “Maybe the lass has her eye on another bloke, hmm? Then slips the potion to the wrong fellow by accident. How’s that for plot thickening, Varric?”

The accursed dwarf chortles. “A comedy of errors, eh? I like how you think, Bordelon — might work well for a Tevinter market. Haven’t tried to expand there yet.”

Margo succumbs to temptation, and steals a quick look at the elf. He is apparently utterly fascinated with some twig on the ground. And he is definitely looking a little flushed — and not a little thunderous. She cocks an eyebrow at the dwarf, which she hopes conveys the heartfelt ‘*really?!*’ she is making every effort to not express verbally. Varric looks unrepentant. Margo sighs. The easiest solution is to probably play along. She makes a show of extracting Auntie’s

compendium — the copy now well-worn and dog-eared — from her coat pocket.

“Fine, let’s see what Arancia might have on offer by way of plot devices. I don’t suppose a simple stamina potion would be enough for your purposes?”

“Oh-ho! A witty alchemist. I should add that to the story — everyone likes a plucky heroine.”

Solas has another coughing fit. Cassandra makes a noise that could, quite possibly, be a stifled giggle.

“Anyway, nah, just a stamina draught won’t do here, I’m afraid — but that gives me an idea for how to solve the, shall we say, frequency problem. I am working with a fixed word count after all.”

Margo leafs through the tome with grim resolve. Auntie really needs a better index — perhaps this is something she could take up in her spare time. If she ever has spare time between making grenades, roasting the living dead, and fielding mortifying provocations from evil dwarfs. “Let me think for a second.”

“Oh, take your time, Prickly. Solas, what about you? As the resident apostate. Does the mage yearn for another? Maybe a past love, tragic death — readers love that kind of garbage.”

Solas's tone could cut stone. “It is your story, Varric. I will certainly not pretend to know the needs of your audience, nor would I presume to interfere with your creative vision.”

Varric absolutely beams at the elf. “Ah, a stoic, yet sarcastic love interest — I can work with that. So. What might makes our mage throw caution to the wind?”

Margo looks up from her book, only to notice identically curious expressions on both Cassandra’s and Scout Harding’s faces. Varric’s got them right where he wants them.

Solas clears his throat, but manages to remain admirably composed. “Perhaps the mage has a brief lapse in judgement? An ill-considered and impulsive reaction, brought on by ... some unforeseen circumstance. But I am not much of a storyteller, Varric. I fear that my interpretation of the situation you describe would not lend itself easily to serialization. The story would end quickly, and not well.”

Oh, really? Margo tucks the compendium away — the last thing she needs is for this collective idiocy to result in water damage to Auntie’s tome. She glares at the campfire — such as it is. It certainly didn’t feel like a “lapse in judgement” at the time. Or something that would turn into a “short story.” Though considering the situation, it just might end badly — laxatives for everyone.

Varric adopts a surprised expression. “Oh-ho-ho, you’re saying the mage has some misgivings! Well, this would certainly fit with the broody theme. You know, I actually knew an elf like that once. Not a mage, though...”

“But maybe the mage cannot resist despite himself!” Cassandra interjects, apparently not in the market for a tragedy. “Then you could have mounting tension and still meet your editor’s demands. This could still make for a wonderful romance serial, Varric.”

“Truly? And what about you, Seeker? Would you read it?”

Cassandra flushes pink. “I... Ah... Well, none of us have much time to read these days.”

Fortunately for Margo, the stew is ready, and the conversation switches from “literary” matters to more pragmatic ones — what the Avvar might want, whether the epidemic might spread beyond

the mire, and the logistics of mapping the terrain.

Solas manages to avoid her gaze the entire time.

She settles into the first sentry shift with Jan. Unpleasant, squishy, crunchy sounds keep floating from the darkness over the bog, as if something large and casually hungry is milling about, gnawing on old bones, and then sucking out the marrow.

Come to think of it, it probably is.

Margo realizes how exhausted she is because she keeps fading away, and then startling herself awake with a jerk. It's through one of those episodic cycles that she hears Jan slowly stand up on the other side of the campfire. She glances in his direction. He is peering into the darkness, a hand on the hilt of a dagger.

"Something's out there," he says quietly.

The sound is faint — not much more than the irregular drip of water — but something about the quality of the darkness is different. It feels... watchful.

They are both so focused on the gloom ahead that neither notices the subtle movements on the sides of the camp. A hulking shape is caught in the glow of the fire, flickering by like a shadow, absolutely noiseless.

"Look out!" Jan bellows, in an effort to wake up the others. After that, everything happens so fast that later, in retrospect, Margo is unable to parse the sequence of events. She fumbles for a grenade, straining to see anything in the mist. Jan draws his daggers, but he is immediately assaulted by three warriors — two females, and one male — with faces painted to look like skulls. Cassandra and Harding are already standing, Varric and Solas slightly slower, but still right behind them, all in fighting stances, though no attack comes. The shadowy warriors are not, in fact, interested in a direct confrontation. Hands grab at Margo from behind, and before she can react, she is jerked backwards. On instinct, she twists, dodges another set of hands, but after the faint glow of the fire, she can't quite make out her attackers — only intuit them in their movements. She fights blind, trying to make use of her last weeks of daily training, but it doesn't cut it. Something shoves her in the back with ferocious force, and she crashes against another figure — a giant in bluish leathers — and then there is a sack on her head, and a sharp prick in her neck.

She has the sensation of falling into a pit while simultaneously flying up a chimney. Before Margo loses consciousness, she hears Harding call out to her and Jan, but it's faint and garbled, as if through water.

And then, darkness.

Margo wakes up on a damp stone floor. The room is pitch black, save for a faint square of night sky about twenty feet above. She tries to move. Her wrists are tied in front — so that's a win, better than tied at the back — but then she discovers that one of her legs is wedged into something that feels like a stirrup, and secured to a wall. Her range of movement does not exceed a radius of three feet.

"Jan?"

No answer. She tries to move, but her head spins.

“*Jan!*” More urgent now. She hears a faint sound to her right. She crawls over awkwardly, reaching out with her hands.

As her eyes adjust, she glimpses the outline of a supine shape. She recognizes the rogue by his armor — and the mop of black hair. The guy does have great hair, she’ll give him that.

Margo crawls closer, until whatever’s got her anchored to the wall has no more give. “Are you alright?” She tries to locate any visible injuries.

He doesn’t respond. She puts her hand on his forehead. The skin is hot and clammy to the touch. Eventually, she finds his wrist, twisting her hands at an awkward angle to locate the pulse point. His heartbeat is thready and fast. Shit. Some kind of infection? Either a wound she can’t see, a response to the toxin that knocked them out, or he ended up contracting whatever crap killed all the peasants. How long have they been here?

Margo crawls back, trying to get a better sense of the room they’re locked in. It’s narrow, judging by the way the sounds travel, with a very high ceiling. There’s nothing but damp stone, and some filthy, slimy rags in the corner. And a stinky bucket.

So, apparently the Avvar — at least, she assumes that’s who captured them — wanted them as prisoners. But to what end? Are there more of the Inquisition’s people here? There were other soldiers who had disappeared — were they also victims of kidnapping? But, once again, to what purpose? Ransom? Some kind of bargain?

Culinary intentions?

Margo closes her eyes, head still swimming from whatever poison they used to incapacitate her. She’ll have to remember to ask for the formula if someone comes by. Not that she thinks there is much of a chance that anyone would tell her, of course, or that she is going to have the opportunity to deploy it in the future. Though, she’s not dead yet, so that might pass for today’s good news.

At length, she relaxes her back against the stone wall, listening to the drip of water outside the cell. They must be in some kind of castle or keep, though it is oddly quiet — no din of soldiers, no clinking of metal from a training grounds or a forge.

Eventually, she drifts off.

She opens her eyes in Haven’s bathhouse. The space is warm, and clean, and Margo sighs in immense relief — she must have nodded off for a second while resting on one of the bunks, trying to get herself warm. She’s been chilled to the bone lately, and it feels like there’s no getting the cold out.

She is wrapped in a towel, her hair still wet from recently washing it, so she settles back on the bench and pours some more water onto the hot stones, letting the steam waft up, warm against her skin.

“Hello, *da’elgar*.”

She flinches and looks up. Solas.

Except, of course, not actually Solas. First, because she realizes that the actually existing Solas has long since switched the terms — not “*da’elgar*,” or “little spirit,” but “*da’nas*,” or “little soul.” Besides the linguistic divergence, the presence feels different, even though the imitation is

objectively almost perfect.

“I see you got the wolf to teach you a new trick. Clever girl.”

Non-Solas walks a circle around her, hands clasped behind its back, the floating, gliding stride a masterful copy. “Were you hoping for a rescue, poppet?”

Margo clenches her teeth, trying to stop the tremor. She feels naked, and vulnerable, and absolutely out of her fucking depth — first, because she is in fact, practically naked, and she has no idea what sort of defensive moves might work against a desire demon in the first place, and second because even though the thing that looks like Solas talks with his voice, and in his tone, she now can intuit the contours of the entity beneath the mask. Because it has, in fact, stopped imitating Solas’s speech patterns.

And it does sound Evil, with a capital E.

“Do you not find it amusing that it is I who always visits when you call? But of course, you must realize that your little rendez-vous in the Fade are always on your nice new friend’s terms, yes? It is not as if *you* could summon *him*.”

It smiles at her — pleasantly — and takes a seat next to her on the bench.

Margo clenches her hands in her lap. “I was perfectly happy enjoying my bath dream before you interrupted. Now scat.” And it would have sounded wonderfully biting, if her teeth weren’t also chattering.

“Yes, I would imagine you were, little spirit. A difficult thing being locked in an Avvar cell with a dying friend, no food, and no prospects for escape or rescue. I doubt your friends are coming. You heard your wolf — what did he say? A mistaken dalliance? A brief moment of weakness? Wouldn’t it all be much easier for him if you just —” He flicks his fingers with a theatrical flourish. “Went away?”

Margo narrows her eyes. It is not, in fact, what Solas had said. The thing is twisting it around, fishing out her own reinterpretations. Amplifying her fears. Does it hurt? Naturally. But, also, good to know the mechanism. She files it away for later.

If there is a later.

Non-Solas turns, straddles the bench, inches a little closer to her, and then he reaches for her braid and begins to slowly take it apart, fingers perversely gentle — and cold as ice — against the bare skin of her shoulder. Margo forces herself not to flinch away in revulsion.

“You and I have started off on the wrong foot, don’t you think? Or, wait, that is not quite true, is it? We started off on a perfectly right foot the first time around, with that delightful little draught.” It winks at her. “But then I think we took a wrong turn.” Another lock of hair carefully separated out of the braid, and laid against her naked back. “Let me make it up to you.” It smiles, and the smile is such a perfect imitation of the actual Solas’s occasionally rueful smirk that Margo feels the coordinates of her world shift from their axis. A wave of nausea washes over her. “This one will be for free — a sign of my goodwill. Something neutral, perhaps, something that will help you talk your way out of your predicament. And who knows, maybe save your dying friend here? What is that word you use... ah, yes. Some ‘ethnographic’ information about the Avvar. How does that sound?”

“No.” It’s all she can say, really. “Scat.”

The creature chuckles, sounding just delighted by all of this. “Oh, my sweet stranded little morsel, what a stubborn wee thing you are! You know, I think you are misinterpreting my intent. I do not wish to force you into anything. I am, after all, a choice spirit. The choice, as they say, is yours. But...” Another strand of hair carefully detangled. “Consider this. This dance with your... mage friend. It will take a lot from you, will it not? It’s always one step forward two steps back with him. All that... emotional labor! All that uncertainty! You give and you give... And what do you get in return?” It clucks sympathetically. “When really, what you are asking for, it is so simple! Someone to talk to as an equal. Someone to guide you through this unfamiliar world of ours. Someone to offer comfort when comfort is needed, yes? Simple, sweet things, hmm?” It strokes her now detangled hair. “A little of this, a little of that... You see, I can offer you a much more... quid pro quo arrangement.”

“What the hell do you want from me?” Margo snaps.

It smiles gently and a little wistfully, in perfect mimicry. “Perhaps I simply enjoy your company. Is that so hard to fathom? Has your emotional entanglement damaged you already that such a thing would be unimaginable? Or... is it an older ache? Something from before?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Margo decides that she’s had it with this cosmic asshole. “At least don’t insult my intelligence! And quit treating me like a love-sick puppy, it will gain you no points. I know you want something. Out with it.”

The Non-Solas thing chuckles, thoroughly entertained. “Ah, there we go, what a lovely question! Was that so hard? But I see now that I have been offering you the wrong thing. Too abstract, yes? Clever poppet, feels just like any old spirit, could have fooled me.” The thing’s eyes — which, of course, are Solas’s — go unfocused, as if he is peering through her like through a pane of glass.

“Always wants to know the answer hidden underneath the others. The kiss was real, so why the panic? Would rather know and hurt, than wonder. Knows well the taste of bitter roots.”

The thing that is not Solas looks up at her, and its expression is full of tender, utterly believable compassion. It is the most terrifying thing she has ever seen.

“Of course, ma da’elgar, you would want to know why he turned away. I can tell you that. It would cost you almost nothing. A trifle.”

Oh, no, no. No fucking way. But for a split second, the thought crosses her mind, and icy terror scuttles down her back.

“Well? Would you trade me for it? Lets say... something small, nothing too personal. Not, like, say... a memory. Something that’s not even yours to give, really. A kiss? Yes. The wolf got one. I would like one as well.”

And then, the door to the bathhouse flies open, letting in a gust of frosty air, and a giant fellow in blue armor with a truly impressive white mane ambles in, and declares, in a thickly accented baritone: “Come, Outworlder. You shouldn’t be talking to that one.”

Margo wakes up.

This chapter was brought to you by some fava beans, and a nice Chianti, because Imshy likes to switch up his villain personas.

Prison Blues

Chapter Summary

In which Margo receives an Avvar visitor, has a heart to heart with Jan, learns a new trick, and continues to have a suboptimal day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Margo sits on the freezing floor, and waits, in dull, vague terror. Time crawls, or flies, she can't tell. Later — could be ten minutes or an hour, or three, for all she knows — the darkness of the cell is split by a sharp shaft of light that expands into a door-shaped rectangle, and Margo squints against the glare. A large humanoid figure looms in the opening, and even though she can't make out her visitor's features, she is almost certain it is the Avvar from her Imshael nightmare.

At the thought of the demon, Margo shudders with a mix of loathing and mortification. It feels... dirty, somehow, like she is the one who did something stupid and now has to live with the consequences. Like a drunken, embarrassing one night stand with a creepy, and likely dangerous stranger.

What the hell does that thing want from her? Doesn't it have other people to harass?

In the meantime, the white-maned giant enters the cell, a torch in one hand, and a bowl of something that Margo hopes is food in another. He sets the bowl in front of Margo, the crude handle of a wooden spoon sticking out of it at an angle. He wedges the torch into a wall mount, then he crouches in front of her.

Her eyes have sufficiently adjusted to the new illumination, and Margo takes the opportunity to examine her visitor more closely. The top of his face is covered with a close-fitting mask made of something that could be metal, or could be cured leather, and that only leaves his mouth and chin exposed. Above that is a thick white mane of corded hair. The skin beneath the mask is weatherworn, and he seems older — in his mature years whatever that might be for his kind. He does seem human, by and large, except for the size.

"You are far from home, Outworlder," he comments, and the eyes staring at her from the mask are dark and sparkle with a keen intelligence.

"What do you mean?" Margo asks, mostly to buy herself some time to process the new moniker. Can he see what she is, somehow?

"Simply what I said. You are not from the mountain, not from the ice and stone and sky. A valley weed. Your spirit grew in fat grassy soils, where the gods that dwell are sweet and playful, and only rarely ask for blood. So, a lowlander. You walk in the skin of another. You are not a god first, though you traded your place with a mad one." There is a kind of flat, staccato quality to his voice, as if he is listening to words that arise inside himself, and then repeating them out loud. "And you are far from your home and unlikely to see it again. So, an outworlder."

Margo tries to process all this and weighs her options. She has no idea what the revelation of her

status might mean to this man, or to his people. Or who his people are, exactly. Or why she and Jan are being held prisoner. That the Avvar are different — viscerally, profoundly different — from what she has so far seen of Thedas is abundantly clear.

But she does have a way of mapping whoever the white-maned giant is. As Varric would say, if she were a betting woman, she'd wager this is some kind of ritual specialist. A shaman, perhaps.

"You seem to be remarkably unsurprised by any of this," Margo ventures. It seems more logical not to deny what he is saying outright — in no small part because she feels like he might be *channeling* something — but she's not about to burst out with a relieved confession about how she's really a stranded scholar from a different realm re-embodied as an elven rogue.

"Why would I be surprised? You are here, as you are, which means that this has happened before, and it will happen again. If the gods have willed it, I am not one to argue. What is there to be surprised about?" He takes the bowl, and places it in her hands. "I am a Amund. I watch the Sky and read the Lady's signs. Now eat."

Margo maneuvers the bowl into her lap, and begins to shovel the thin colorless gruel into her mouth — an awkward proposition when your hands are tied. She is too hungry to notice the taste. While she eats, she thinks furiously. She is not a specialist in the history of religion, but she does have enough background knowledge to sketch an intellectual map for the Avvar's words. Are his people animists? He called her a lowlander, so by extension his identity must be tied to "highlands" — or mountains. Which might mean they're out of their element in the crapsack bog. Invading, then? Or have they been pushed out?

Highlands. In that context, a cult of the sky would make sense. She wonders if his people practice sky burials, as was done throughout Central Asia and the Himalayan Plateau. And he mentions gods, so a complex, polytheistic pantheon is likely. So, not the Chantry. Those, by and large, seem closer to the monotheistic end of the spectrum, as far as religious beliefs go.

"Why have you captured us?" she asks instead.

He shrugs. "I have no quarrel with you, outsider." A derisive note creeps into her visitor's tone. "The son of our clan's thane wishes to augment his standing by challenging the Herald of Andraste. I wager he believes that capturing your people will draw her attention."

Margo forces herself to stop eating, so that some of the gruel is left for Jan. Here comes the gambit. "My companion is sick. Can you help him? Or let me give him something? I can make a healing potion for him if I have the ingredients."

Amund cocks his head to the side, considering Jan's huddled shape on the floor. "What for? If he is dying, the gods must find this pleasing."

Margo frowns. "He is running a fever. It means he most likely has an infection, and if I can figure out what is causing it and address it, maybe I can stop it."

The Avvar stares at her curiously. "Tell me, Outworlder. Two men hunt in the same party. One is mauled by a bear, the other is left unscathed. Why?"

Margo tries to read the Avvar's expression, but it is difficult to gauge behind the mask. His face remains placid, but there's an odd gleam in his dark eyes, an intense but distracted curiosity, as if he is listening to two conversations at once, trying to split his attention between them.

"I..." She thinks. This is familiar, a common religious explanation for misfortune in her world as

well. “I suppose because the man who is mauled had incurred some kind of cosmic debt,” she ventures. “Or angered a deity. Or angered his own protector, who turned away from him.”

The Avvar stays silent for a long time. “Could be. Or could be that the other one has garnered enough favor to deflect the danger from himself. Where you come from, Outworlder, do your gods speak through birds, and winds, and clouds?”

Margo mulls this over. Of course, reading portents is in most shamanic beliefs — place spirits, animal spirits, sometimes the spirits of ancestors that attach to a particular lineage and rain misery or incessant demands on their living kin all communicate in subtle ways. But, if she’s being honest with herself, her knowledge of this isn’t entirely academic or abstract, either. Baba’s world was... inhabited. An enchanted sort of banality. With trickster house spirits that misplaced your favorite teacup, and terrifying forest spirits that would steal a baby and trade it for something not altogether recognizable, and water spirits that lure you into a sink hole at the bottom of the river, or look back at you from the dark depths with a reflection not your own. Baba was a narrative poacher, a collector, weaving whatever strands of folklore she came across into the stories she told her two surviving grandkids when they were still small. She didn’t discriminate much by cultural origin — if it dwelled, if it had intent, if you could leave it some milk and bread, if you could query it for a favor, if it could trap you, or beguile you, or bend your luck, then in it went into the great stew pot of her tales.

“Sometimes,” Margo nods at length. “Though not everyone listens. And I suppose not everyone can hear.”

The Avvar remains still for a long time, seemingly lost in thought — or, perhaps, listening to some internal melody only he can distinguish.

“If... If my friend has angered the gods, then perhaps there is also a reason why he ended up being captured with me — and not alone, or with someone else. If I had the right tools, I think I could help him.”

“Perhaps if the gods will it, you might. The world is all that is the case, after all.”

Margo stares, startled. Did the Avvar just quote Ludwig Wittgenstein at her?

“I cannot help you beyond bringing you food. But you are not entirely deaf, for a lowlander. And you walk the dreams. Though I would advise you to stop calling on the wishmonger god. You do not want one such as he to take a liking.” He rumbles a grim chuckle. “Not all of our gods play fair, stranger.” Amund straightens, an eerily silent movement for a man his size. Apparently, Avvar armor is made for ambushing.

“What will your thane’s son do with us?”

Amund shrugs. “Hand of Korth? He will do whatever he thinks will usher a confrontation with your leader faster. He is a stupid and impatient brat.” He considers her. “When you die, I could rend your bones for the Lady of the Sky, if you so wish. I have never had her reject my offerings.”

Well. She supposes that answers the sky burial question.

He leaves them the torch.

Margo forcefeeds Jan the rest of her gruel. The rogue is lethargic, his skin clammy and hot to the touch. She tries to find a wound. “Does anything hurt,” she asks, trying to brush his hair, sticky

with sweat, out of his face.

He stirs and points to his chest. Margo tries to unbuckle the rogue's armor, her fingers slipping on the damp leather. Beneath the stained undershirt, she finds some severe bruising around his rib cage, but the skin is not broken, just discolored and mottled with hematomas. She concludes it must be internal damage. Which, of course, is worse.

Time creeps to the patter of rain outside. Eventually, another Avvar — not Amund, but a woman, her face painted in stark black and white streaks — brings them water. The warded lock shuts like a gunshot after she leaves. The liquid tastes brackish and sulfurous — and will probably give them both severe gastrointestinal distress — but Margo is so thirsty it takes an active effort not to gulp everything down all at once. She notices that they are being given only one ration, and she suspects that it is meant for her, and not the sick man.

Margo makes sure Jan gets his share.

The keep is disconcertingly quiet save for the incessant drip of rain.

Margo forces herself to stay awake, terrified of what might be lurking in the Fade, waiting for her. What did the Avvar shaman say? Something about her calling Imshael?

To pass the time — and to avoid losing her marbles — Margo goes through the poetry she has managed to retain over the years, or made herself memorize as an exercise when her grasp of English was still shaky. T.S. Eliot's *Wastlands*, she recalls almost in its entirety — a byproduct of photographic memory. Poe's *Raven* too. That one's easy. She whispers it under her breath. Once upon a midnight dreary, indeed. Chunks of the *Divine Comedy* float by, incomplete — a stanza here, a stanza there. She moves to song lyrics then. That keeps her occupied, humming, for a time. She gets stuck on *Gloomy Sunday*, her mother tongue suddenly strange in her borrowed mouth. *Ősz van és peregnek a sárgult levelek...* She sings the first verse under her breath until she catches herself, glances at Jan, and switches to the English version. The melody won't let her go.

*Sunday is gloomy
My hours are slumberless
Dearest the shadows
I live with are numberless*

When she comes to the end of the song, Jan coughs. "Know anything that's not so bloody dreary, lass?"

She goes through *The Doors' Bird of Prey*. Sky burials.

"Not helping it, love. Not helping."

She switches to nursery rhymes.

Then, when she runs out of those, she counts bricks.

Jan's breathing pattern changes. He is coughing intermittently, weakly, but with a kind of wet, gurgling rattle to it. Margo maneuvers herself to him, and gets him partially off the floor, propping him up into a half-sitting position so that it's easier to breathe. He leans against her, skin hot like a furnace. "Listen. If I die here, I need you to do something for me." His voice is quiet, but when he opens his eyes, they seem tired, but aware. Unclouded.

"You're not going to die, Bordelon. We're going to get out of this shitpit."

He chuckles, then it devolves into a rattling cough, which he covers as best he can. Blood bubbles form on his lips, and Margo decides it's not an infection. It's moving too fast. Blood in his lungs?

"Feisty one. I like you. And not just because I'd like to bed you," he adds, and there's a kind of rueful self-irony there that gets Margo smiling despite herself. "Though there's that too."

"I still have to meet a woman you wouldn't like to bed, Jan, so I won't take this too personally. And I'm sure there's a whole trail of skirts yet unlifted in your future, so hold on tight, all right?"

He smiles a little crookedly, but then his expression turns serious. "Two favors. I have a kid. In Redcliffe." He says it matter of factly, with no apology. "When I kick it, take whatever pension the Inquisition owes for my hide to his mother. Elandra. Elven lass. Redhead."

Margo feels her heart constrict. This idiot doesn't deserve this. None of them deserve this. All this absurd, unnecessary death, and for what? Petty fucking posturing between nearsighted bigmen, waving their phalluses around. She'd very much like to meet this Hand of Korth, whoever he is. And maybe feed him his own eyeballs as a prophylactic against future idiocy.

"If it comes to that, I promise you I will. What's the other favor?"

Jan's face distorts with an angry grimace. "Ser Geoffroy de Bordelon's the name. Haven't seen the old man in... fuck, fifteen years, give or take." He falls silent, his breath ragged.

"Bad blood?" Margo prods him, her tone gentle.

"Yeah. That's me. Bad blood. Didn't like my 'whoring, gambling' ways, see. Not fit for a *chevalier's* son. I was... eh. A bit of a disappointment, you could say. Never mind that they hunt elves like rats, for sport — and that's not all they do — but you take up with an elven lass and you pay her fair, and it's 'you dishonor my good name.'"

Margo processes this. She decides to shelve the empty reassurances. "What would you have me do? If it comes to that?"

Jan grins viciously. "Have the ambassador send him my regards. And let him know that his good name will continue, because his son sired an elven bastard. Just don't say where."

They sit like that for a while.

Margo hopes that the others made it out all right. She also hopes that Evie doesn't decide to march down here to the rescue. This shit-bog isn't worth it. Leliana is right. They really are disposable, in the grand scheme of things. She closes her eyes. Jan is ... right, by and large. The chances of them making it out alive are relatively slim. There's not a hell of a lot she can do about that, but she could, maybe, in theory, warn the others. At least, she might be able to let them know where the soldiers disappeared to, and what the Avvar want. That they are not acting under the command of the tribe's thane, but of his son, and that there is at least some dissent among their ranks, if Amund's opinion is anything to go by. That the keep is unlikely to be well-fortified, and that there will probably be no reinforcements from other Avvar groups.

But for that she would have to dream. And risk another encounter with the cosmic shitgibbon.

She closes her eyes, trying to quiet the low-grade tremor — equal parts hypothermia and terror. She huddles closer to the rogue — cynically, horribly grateful for his fever, because the heat he gives off keeps her from shaking like a leaf.

It takes a long time for her to drift off.

When Margo opens her eyes, the space is a non-Euclidean mess, like an Escher sketch rendered in shades of puke green. She walks up a staircase that keeps looping back on itself, until she simply gives up, and sits down on a step.

She's never tried to actively call the elf before. Not just "think" towards him, or whatever abstract action of mind is required to control the Fade, but simply call him, as one would an acquaintance one spots down the street.

"Solas," she says. She expects an echo, but instead the air — or whatever passes for it in this space — muffles the sound. Like talking into a cardboard tube.

"Da'nas. You are alive." She turns her head, and there he is, right next to her, sitting on the step above hers. Her first reaction is to shrink away, because for a split second, she's not sure — and she is utterly terrified that she summoned the other horror. Again. But then the feeling dissipates, replaced by a kind of conviction, at a sensorial level she has no name for, that this is, indeed, the elf.

"Are you hurt?" he asks, his hand reaching out — at first, she thinks, for her cheek. Instead, he settles his palm on her shoulder.

She looks at him then, and is vaguely, abstractly amused that the "warm fuzzies" — or whatever one might call the initial period of your standard, garden variety crush — have surreptitiously morphed into the next stage, the emotional storm of full blown infatuation. Nothing like inexplicable rejection to feed the fire, apparently. How very predictable.

Oh well, this too shall pass — and relatively soon, if the Avvar have any say in the matter. Margo smiles, probably a little sadly, because, really, it is too bad they likely won't get to know each other better. Whatever the other stuff between them might be — and yes, it's the big pink unresolved elephant in the room (though the thought of a resolved elephant is somewhat alarming in and of itself) — Solas proved an interesting interlocutor. And, in the end, she'd trade just about anything for a glass of wine in front of the fire, and a long evening conversation. Maybe about the nature of spirits. Or magic. Religion. Theodosian history. Or hell, even Elvhen linguistics, she wouldn't mind learning more about that. Is it agglutinative? Does it have vowel harmony? What's the syntax? Or what he thinks of the Avvar. Or Qunari. Or Tevinter. Or anything else about this strange, terrible, dazzling world.

Ah, fuck. It's the ones you want to talk to that you need to watch out for, as Baba liked to joke.

"Margo, please... Tell me where you are. Tell me how to help you." And there is such urgency in his voice, that, for a second, she just wants to fall into his arms, close her eyes, and breathe in deeply the scent of ozone and smoke and pine needles.

Of course, she doesn't. Even if she could, there is no time.

"I don't know how long I'll keep up the dream. We are in a keep, or castle. Jan is here as well. He's dying." Her voice barely hitches. "There are other Inquisition soldiers here somewhere, but not in the same place where we are kept."

There is a wobble to the dreamworld, and Margo rushes through the words, before the dream disintegrates. "Listen, this is all at the behest of some Avvar lord's son. I believe he wants to challenge Evie to increase his own status — so we are either a lure, or hostages. Not all of the Avvar are on his side, and I don't think the keep is theirs — I think they're squatting. It sounds very uninhabited."

The dream wobbles again.

Solas reaches for her, both hands on her shoulders now, and the dreamscape stabilizes. “Can you tell me anything else about the location?”

“I’m sorry. They had us drugged with something.” Margo quirks her lips in a smile, trying to dispel the strange, bone-gnawing sorrow. “Do me a favor and ask them for the recipe if you get the chance? I bet Adan would just love to add it to his collection.”

“Ma da’nas...”

“Solas, listen, if I don’t see you again, I wanted to say... thank you. For helping me. It was kind of you. And...” She doesn’t quite know what she wants to tell him, and none of it would fit in the allocated time anyway. Language, she suddenly realizes, is a very linear thing.

He’s about to say something, but Margo motions for him to wait. Instead, she tries to replicate what he did when he was returning her memories. She would never even consider trying anything like this under normal circumstances — but what does she have to lose at this point, right? If it doesn’t work — and she’s pretty certain it won’t — and ends up being embarrassing, at least it won’t be embarrassing for too much longer.

What did Amund say? When you die, I can rend your bones for you.

A final kindness.

It’s awkward, weird work, that strains something in her mind that she didn’t know was there in the first place. At length, she manages to produce a fragile little dream bubble, except instead of being encapsulated it is sort of *excapsulated*, for lack of a better term. It’s not well-executed — messy, schematic, and missing crucial bits, like a toddler’s drawing. But it does contain the thought-impression of her wish. Or perhaps not so much a thought, as a kind of memory. A hypothetical. One that didn’t happen, but could have been.

The world is all that is the case.

Fireplace. Wine. A long conversation that doesn’t exactly have a set goal, but rather coils and uncoils, meandering, like a stroll down a misty alley in some old, overgrown, half-forgotten park.

It’s maybe the size of a baseball, no more than that. She pushes it toward Solas, and he catches it in one hand. Except that’s not quite right either — Margo is not sure what he does with it, but this is how her mind glosses over an act for which she lacks the proper interpretative apparatus.

His eyes widen. The elf stares at her, an expression she really can’t decipher on his features. There’s surprise there, but that’s the tip of the iceberg, and below it something complicated and a little pained, like a habit suddenly having to rearrange itself, working against a familiar pattern ossified by repeated use.

The world wobbles, comes off kilter.

“I’m out of time,” Margo says. The dream slips.

“Letha’laim, wait...”

She opens her eyes.

She can’t quite tell how much time passes. Less than a day-cycle, but it’s hard to tell with the

perpetual murky rain that drenches the miserable bog.

The next time they're brought food and water, there is a lockpick hidden inside Margo's bowl of gruel.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The standard interpretation of the statement 'the world is all that is the case' has to do with the relationship between logic, language, and the possibilities of description. It made sense to me that Amund might use a statement along those lines to express the simple, practical facticity of his gods, and how their will manifests in the world. When Margo references the same sentence later, she does it with a different meaning: she's getting a sense of the non-dualism of the Fade, which allows for competing possibilities to co-exist at once -- if a given proposition is plausible, from the perspective of formal logic, then it can be brought into existence (hence there is no "absolute" truth in the Fade, as we get from the in-game conversations about what happened in Ostagar). Also, brought to you by sky burials, which are nothing to scoff at.

Next up: Escapes, battles, and unpleasant realizations.

Bad Odds (^)

Chapter Summary

In which Margo and Jan escape, and the team tries to survive the Avvar and Evie's ambient bad luck.

Content warning: minor character death

Chapter Notes

A bit on the violent side.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Margo stares at the lock in mute frustration. The only thing she's ever managed to successfully lockpick in her entire life is a luggage lock. And those things are designed to spring open if you so much as sneeze at them insistently enough.

This is a different matter. A large, heavy locking mechanism — simple and crude, yes, but meant to open only when enough force is applied to turn the key. The word that comes to mind is warded lock.

Jan would know what to do. But he is in no state to help.

She still tries, maneuvering herself closer to the rogue, and using the opportunity to get more of the questionable water into him. Eventually, she is able to make him drink, and his eyes flutter open. He groans, his breath coming shallow and hitched.

“Jan, walk me through how to pick a lock.”

It takes him a while to respond, and when he does, his voice is barely a rasp. “Maker’s hairy backside, lass... You forgot that too?”

Margo holds the lock pick in front of his eyes to give him a sense of the kind of tool they have to work with.

“Skeleton key,” he says. “Stick it in, move it around until you can turn it.”

Not very helpful, but she supposes she can cut him some slack, on account of the whole dying thing. Margo pushes the hysteries as far down as they’ll go — which isn’t very far — and sticks the skeleton key into the keyhole. And, after what feels like an eternity, it catches. Cautiously, she tries to turn the pick clockwise. She almost has it... and then it jams, and won’t budge.

Shit.

She pushes it in a fraction of an inch, her palms sweaty and her fingers slippery. Tries to turn it. Nothing. Pulls it out a bit, keeping whatever half-turn she has managed to wrangle out of it. And

then, with a loud popping sound, the lock clicks open.

Margo extracts her foot from the cuff, wincing at what is probably a nasty, infected sore — but she has neither the time nor the inclination to examine it too closely at this point. She limps to the door. It's a similar kind of mechanism — another crude warded lock. This one takes her about twenty minutes of squatting and muttering unflattering things about Avvar matriline to disengage. She is sweating despite the damp cold, terror prickling between her shoulder blades. Then, finally, the lock submits to her unskilled ministrations with a satisfying *clank*. She eases the door open and sneaks a look up and down the hallway.

Empty.

After a brief moment of hesitation, Margo leaves the cell and closes the door behind her. First things first, she needs to find something to stabilize Jan — without that, there is no way she can move him, and she's not leaving without him. She tries to recall which directions the footsteps usually came from. The odds that their stuff is kept somewhere close to their cell are slim to none. Most likely, they've already been distributed among their captors, but if she can find wherever they make their gruel, there is a chance she might come across elfroot. Or, if she's really lucky, maybe even Some Fungus — and then she can make something out of that.

She stops in the middle of the hallway. The smell is faint but unmistakable — the sweet, coppery tang of blood lotus reeds — like blood and violets. Her nose leads her to a small crammed windowless room. Furniture is pushed together haphazardly, broken and rotting from disuse or maltreatment. She spots a pile of stuff in the corner, and she eyes it dubiously. Has her luck really turned? It's all manner of equipment — belts, a few knapsacks, some items of clothing. Boots. She recognizes an Inquisition hood by the heinous lime green.

When in doubt, rummage. Margo stifles an unhinged cackle when she spots her grenade belt, at the side of the pile. It's probably the origin of the smell — she never did have the chance to clean it properly before they got kidnapped, and Adan had mentioned to her once that the blood lotus oxidizes with a strong odor. It's probably going to be a bitch to get the smell out now, but Margo has never been so grateful in her life for this particular lapse in proper hygienic practices.

A vague thought about why the Avvar are piling everything in one place fleets across her mind, but she dismisses it as currently irrelevant. Maybe they don't find value in these particular objects, or maybe they have some kind of elaborate redistribution system. One of her dagger sheaths is there — the one that's more visibly damaged — but the weapons are missing. However, the grenade belt is practically intact — one health and two lyrium potions are broken, but all the grenades are still safely tucked away into their padded cells. And she has two more elfroot draughts and one magica tonic to work with. She also finds a dirk — an old weapon with a slightly loose hilt, which confirms the refuse status of the heap. Margo sets the salvage aside, and she uses the dirk to saw through her wrist bindings, muttering the whole way. Beneath a torn, very smelly gambeson she finds something that looks like a paring knife — though the correct term is probably "shiv." She grabs both of those.

Margo runs back with her loot, heart hammering in her throat because how much longer can her luck hold before it runs out? This would be the perfect moment for some unaccommodating and aggressively minded Avvar to show up and check on the prisoners. Though no one has really bothered with them much, not counting Amund. Which probably just means that this is precisely the time their captors suddenly choose to rectify this oversight.

The hallway remains deserted.

She steps inside the cell. Jan is curled up on the floor, and Margo decides she doesn't like the fetal

position he has adopted one bit. It reminds her of a dead fly, its legs curled up against its abdomen. She kneels by the rogue, lifts his head, unstoppers one of the elfroot vials with her teeth, and pours the contents down his throat. He coughs, but she manages to make most of it go down.

The draught works with its usual uncanny speed. What is it about the local plants that causes the body to metabolize the active ingredients so well? Or, conversely, what is it about local bodies?

Jan opens his eyes — normally, a rich, piercing blue, but, in the gloom, a dark gray. He gives her a faint smile. “Better. Not good. But better. Can you get me out of the manacles?”

It takes some fiddling with the skeleton key, but it goes faster than the first time around. Margo helps him stand up, and Jan leans on her heavily as they make their way out of the door — the scent of elfroot mixing with the smell of blood, sweat, and whatever tannin was used to cure his leathers. At least, he doesn’t smell quite so sick anymore, so there’s that.

Once they are in the hallway, Margo stalls. This is as far as her brilliant escape plan went — from there, she’s not sure what to do. Left or right?

“That way.” Jan points his chin to the left, probably relying on whatever tacit knowledge he has of military forts.

At the end of the hallway, they find a set of stairs. They hobble down one flight, and then Jan’s hand closes around her wrist in a warning gesture. Some kind of commotion has started outside. Sounds drift from below — the rhythmic pounding of boots hitting the cobblestones, the swishing of metal drawn from leather sheaths. The staircase has led them to a platform next to a narrow embrasure, from which Margo has a restricted, but serviceable view of the courtyard.

She peeks out.

The keep’s central hall is drenched in rain. There might have been a point when the fort was truly majestic — a century ago or two ago. From their elevated vantage point, Margo can see right down to what was once the floor of the main hall, where the stones retain the faint traces of decorative patterns. Back when the fort wasn’t in shambles, there would have been a roof in the way.

At one end of the hall, she spots a group of Avvar warriors — same bluish leather, same black and white streaks of war paint criss-crossing their faces. She tries to locate Amund, but he is nowhere in sight. In the center of the hall, a large muscular fellow adorned with a horned helmet that looks like it would get routinely stuck in narrow doorways makes a mock welcoming gesture with an axe the size of a stealth bomber.

Other prisoners — all of them in Inquisition uniforms — are led forward by a retinue of archers. Margo counts six other captives. A few are limping, and one is being carried by his comrades. They are arranged into a kind of semi-circle by their escort.

“Lowland scum!” The voice is low-pitched, arrogant, and carries well. The horned bastard — Margo decides to re-brand him Hand on Krotch — swings his giant axe onto his shoulders like it’s a plastic pool noodle. “You are about to witness your puny leader defeated by the mighty Hand of Korth! And then you shall die, and your blood will please the gods and bring good fortune to the true Avvar!”

Margo shakes her head. Oh for fuck’s sake, really? This is what they get? All of this death and misery because of this bombastic idiotic with a penchant for referring to himself in the third person? She looks down at the Avvar warriors. Based on their body language, a few of them are very clearly itching for a fight — they are swinging their weapons around and bouncing from foot

to foot. But not all. A good number of them just look bored.

The contingent of archers leads the prisoners away, and the rest of the Avvar look like they're getting ready for something. Eventually, the archers come back, taking positions. The warriors call to each other in a harsh, guttural vernacular Margo can't understand — though it sounds vaguely germanic. Whatever it is, she is pretty sure that it is meant to be some version of pre-fight trash talk.

Ah shit... Does this mean that Evie and crew were actually convinced to challenge this troglodyte?

Margo leans into the embrasure, hoping to get a better view of the totality of the Avvar forces. There's maybe fifteen of them that she can see. A stab of anxiety hits her in the solar plexus. Shit. If what she suspects about the luck-bending properties of Evie's mark is true — and she's pretty sure something about her theory is correct — then there is absolutely no way that four or even five of them can take out this group of warriors, who are fighting on their own turf, and without any known handicap save for the fact that their leader is a lugubrious cretin.

And then she spots movement around the entrance to the hall, where a long, wide set of stairs leads down into what must be the lower levels of the keep. She peers into the murk, trying to discern who — or what — is moving.

"Herald of Andraste!" the horned axe-wielding asshat bellows. "Face me! I am the hand of Korth and I shall bring your doom!"

Jan groans. "Well. There's a bloody pillock." He sits up to look through the opening in the stone. "How many of ours?"

Margo tries to get a better view, but the embrasure is too narrow. After several interminable moments, familiar figures begin to materialize out of the fog.

Cassandra is taking the lead. The warrior princess walks in with a confident swagger, a hand on the pommel of her sword. Margo thinks she's strolling in like she owns the place as a deliberate provocation — to draw attention to herself and away from Evie. No one expects the Inquisition, and there's no way anyone expects Evie to be the Herald of Andraste. The bearlike shape stalking parallel to the Seeker must be Blackwall, and Margo breathes out in relief at the sight of him. Yup, physics-defying bear is a sight for sore eyes — alongside Cassandra, they make a formidable pair. Behind them, she spots three more figures. Varric, center, Bianca in front of him like an AK-47. The Orlesian mage — the Iron Lady, as Varric would have it — to the left. And Solas, on the other side.

Evie is walking about twenty paces behind them all. At least the kid's armor is now looking a lot more practical. Margo watches her move, and winces. Still that weirdness — the slight wrongness, or the sense of being *out of place* is there, a kind of stilted quality to every step and gesture. But she is far enough away that whatever strange effects her mark might produce, it might not affect the others' fortunes too severely. Well. Maybe this can be won.

"Six of them in total," Margo tells the rogue.

"Fifteen to six. That's not good odds," Jan trails, and then he is gripped by a coughing fit interspersed with rather colorful expletives. "Do you have another draught?"

Margo shoots him a quick look. "Last one. Is it getting worse?"

He doesn't respond right away. "No. But, as I said, this is not good odds. Can't very well fight in

this state.”

Margo frowns. “Jan, I didn’t drag you all the way out here to get you killed. Maybe sit this one out, yeah?”

“Stop fussing, lass. I’ll be fine. Just...”

They don’t have time to finish the argument. The great horned buffoon emits another aggressive bellow, and the room explodes in battle. Margo finds herself running down the staircase towards the great hall, the sounds of metal hitting metal ringing in her ears. The air crackles, an updraft hitting her nose with the smell of ozone and ancient mountain glaciers. The ozone must be Solas’s magic. The glacial breeze, she guesses, is Vivienne’s.

Before she can burst out into the courtyard, her brain finally switches on, and she forces her body to slow down. She is armed with a shiv — Jan got the dirk — and a few grenades. What the hell is she thinking? The adrenaline has carried her this far, but she’d be an idiot to think that she is battle-ready after however many days in a dank, frozen cell with minimal food and water, and little sleep. It’s one thing to train in the rink with people who are not actively trying to kill her. It’s an altogether different thing to try to survive an actual slaughter.

She turns around. Jan, close on her heels, makes a sour face. Judging by his expression, the rogue just came to a very similar conclusion about their chances.

They enter the great hall quietly, hidden from view by one of the crumbling columns.

Margo surveys the battlefield — and her stomach tightens into a terrified little ball. The pattern is more subtle this time, not as glaring as it was in the ancient fortress in the Hinterlands, with the demon ring and the hell-yolk rift. This... this you could miss if you didn’t know where to look.

An archer releases the bowstring with a whistling thwack, and the arrow flies towards Evie, but it misses by a wide margin, even though the shot was well aimed. Blackwall, forced back on a close orbit to Evie by two large Avvar warriors, parries an attack from one heavily armored opponent — step, parry, strike, an underhanded pommel blow from below in lieu of an uppercut. He deflects a mace with his shield, but then his sword lands oddly, the strike reverbing into his arm and leaving him open for a split second. His opponent exploits this, sending the gravity-defying bear flying with a kick to the stomach.

Another arrow — too fast to see, of course, but aimed at Evie once again, goes wild. Cassandra taunts the giant horned buffoon, but then she loses her footing on the wet cobblestone and has to compensate with an awkward side-step. Hand on Krotch kicks out his foot and trips her, and the Seeker rolls out of the way, narrowly avoiding being split in half by the oversized axe.

Evie, still in the back of the group, but closer now — too close — strikes out against one of the archers charging at her with a dagger. It’s an awkward, unpracticed movement with a sword too heavy for her. It doesn’t connect, and the momentum carries her around, exposing her back to her attacker. Margo’s heart freezes, anticipating the fatal blow. A few paces away Vivienne’s spell fails with a spectacular explosion of ice crystals, and the mage is blown back by the shock wave, crumpling into a pile of fancy Orlesian couture on the keep’s floor. The dagger-wielding rogue takes a few wobbly steps, then he drops to the floor, face up. A stray ice shard is embedded into his eye socket.

Margo gives Jan a quick look.

“Still bad odds,” he says.

Did he see the same thing as she did in the old fort? He fought with them, but on the outside. But... no. This is subtle. The only reason she's noticing the connections is because she is actively looking for them. Otherwise, it just looks like their side is having a streak of shit luck.

"Jan, listen. We can help them, but you need to do exactly what I say, and don't ask why, all right?" He looks like he's about to argue, so she just rushes right over him. "Stay on the periphery, and take out as many archers as you can."

He gives her a smug grin. "Any other brilliant strategic advice, Commander?"

"Yes. No matter what, don't come close to the Herald."

He frowns at that, but there must be something about her expression that somehow convinces him. He nods.

"I'll need that last potion."

Margo hands it to him with a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. She's making a mistake, somehow, but she is unable to articulate why.

And then, they both spring to their feet, and Margo is running along the perimeter of the skirmish, gripping the first grenade and trying to stop her hands from shaking.

At first, she gets lucky. She takes two of the archers out with the explosives, keeping well outside whatever radius is likely affected by Evie's mark. Jan is sneaking up on a third archer, on the other side of the hall, and Margo leaves him to his task. After the second grenade blows up, she gets noticed — both by her side, and by the Avvar. She hears Varric yell out "Prickly" somewhere behind her, but she's too busy running away from a large Avvar dude who is brandishing what she's pretty sure is a bone club made of the femur of some large, ill-tempered, and likely carnivorous creature.

When the warrior is almost upon her, Margo pivots around and freezes for a split second. Her attacker grins, exposing a row of yellow teeth. There is no time to think. In a movement the Iron Bull had her practice in the icy slush for what felt like three centuries straight, she drops to her knee and strikes at the side of the Avvar's kneecap with an open fist, taking advantage of his size difference. His leg buckles, and, before he can regroup and crush her with his club, Margo slashes with her shiv across the tendons at the back of his left knee, wedging the blade into the crease of his armor. The Avvar collapses with a roar, swinging his club wildly. She springs to her feet and leaves him to it — he's not going to hop away, and someone else can finish him off. She still can't bring herself to kill a man with her own hands.

She steals a quick glance at the others. Somehow, they've been driven into a tighter radius, with Evie at the epicenter — which isn't good at all. The mages swing their staves asynchronously, each with a distinct style of spell casting. Vivienne is more theatrical, as if she is performing on stage, each gesture accompanied by a brief, aesthetically pleasing flourish. Solas's movements are effortless, graceful, and laconic. She catches a brief glimpse of his face in profile — he is pale as a sheet, features gaunt from magical drain, his cheeks hollowed out.

In her estimation, about two thirds of the spells are failing, and every fourth spell or so backfires.

She catches Varric's eyes, rimmed dark and puffy with exhaustion. His expression is drawn. He taps Bianca with his thumb, then he shakes his head once. Margo translates the nonverbal message

as “this shit ain’t working.”

There is absolutely no way they are going to win this.

She looks for Jan, frantically. A flicker of movement behind another archer catches her attention in the far corner of the room. A flash of silver, and the archer’s throat explodes with a stream of crimson. Margo breathes out. At least something is going right. Between her grenades and Jan’s assassination spree, they’ve somehow managed to take care of the long-range threat.

But that still leaves a group of about eight Avvar — minus the one she decommissioned earlier, now dead, likely courtesy of Jan — and another dead body she attributes to Blackwall’s efforts. The Avvar are slowly surrounding Evie and the crew, and even if Solas, and perhaps Varric know they should break formation and disperse, this would go against both instinct and the battle’s momentum. There’s simply nowhere to go without exposing Evie.

And at this point, Margo has seen enough that the Amund’s words suddenly click into place, and the strange probability bending pattern makes a sick kind of sense. The shaman is right. It’s not just that one deflects ill-luck from oneself. It’s that there is a conservation principle at play. You cannot create *ex nihilo*. The magic in Evie’s mark must be leeching luck from her allies — or outsourcing ill-luck to them. Margo gnaws at the inside of her cheek, trying to work her way through the model. This would also mean that when Evie herself gets lucky — and hits her target — fortune is siphoned off from someone else in the party.

Whatever this hexing magic is, it is a kind of vampire.

The colossal absurdity of the whole thing suddenly washes over her with a wave of barely repressed hysterical cackling. And wrath. Pure, unadulterated, fucking wrath at the pointlessness of it. That the horned shitgibbon and his buddies might actually kill her friends — and this world’s best chance at saving itself — and for what? For what asinine purpose? The only reason he’d manage this is that this entire group of accomplished, focused warriors (well, minus Evie) are working with a handicap they can barely see, let alone counteract. Margo somehow manages to stop herself from howling in helpless rage. Just give her enough blood lotus extract to blow this shithole to smithereens, and she’ll do it in a heartbeat. Fuck this.

The only chance they have is if they spread out and get as far away from Evie as possible. Damnit, Varric and Solas must know this, at least on some level, but they’re hemmed in.

Margo’s foot hits something hard. She looks down. Stones. Lots and lots of loose stones, and fragments of stones, littering the periphery of the hall — likely remnants of the collapsed ceiling.

Well, she’s not “without sin,” as they say, but someone’s gotta do the casting, so there we go.

She picks up a baseball-sized stone fragment, weighs it in her palm, and then she adopts a wide stance. Hand on Krotch has his back turned, but he makes a decent target with his size and idiotic helmet. Margo sends a prayer to whatever higher being might be on listening duty, and she launches her projectile.

The stone flies in a neat little arc and thwacks the bonehead smack between the horns before bouncing off. Hand on Krotch shakes it off — a motion remarkably similar to a dog flinging water from its fur — and then he turns around.

Well. It’s not like she can fight the bastards. But she can give them the runaround — Hand on Krotch doesn’t strike her as the brightest tulip in the flowerbed. “Over here, you dickless shitgibbon!” Margo yells. Her body’s slightly raspy alto makes the taunt sound passably

threatening, rather than just juvenile. And it carries well, so that all heads — enemies and allies alike — turn to her. Great. She's got everyone attention now, might as well make the best of it. "Is that a coat rack on your head, or did your mamma like to spread 'em for a goat?"

Because, when in doubt, there are always off-color your mamma jokes.

Varric, bless him, gets what she's trying to do right away. He motions with his free hand — a thumbs up followed by a circular gesture, which Margo interprets as "keep going." While the Avvar warriors are busy waiting for the "head" of the operation's delayed reaction, Solas and Varric fan out, and Vivienne, dragging Evie by the forearm, makes her way towards the shelter of a large pile of architectural rubble. Blackwall and Cassandra widen their stances, shields raised and weapons at the ready.

At this point, Margo is on a roll. After going down a detailed zoological survey of the idiot Avvar's mother's bedroom preferences, she mixes it up with a couple of digs at his own likely underwhelming capacity under the sheets, and then, for good measure, she throws in something vaguely blasphemous about Korth. All the while launching projectiles, which connect with their targets less than she'd like, but most definitely annoy.

The latest Korth insult — something scatological about the god not knowing this idiot from a frozen yak turd (whether Thedas has yaks or not, something about yak turds strikes Margo as universally amusing) — gets the big Avvar to bellow that he is going to tear her limb from limb after fucking her bloody (though it might be in the other order, she's not sure).

"Whatcha waiting for, bonehead?" Another stone. "Or do you need to hold hands first? Come and get me!"

Hand on Krotch charges, but by this point her allies are in position, and Evie's out of the way. Margo takes off at a sprint, down from her own pile of rubble and to the right, trying to outflank the roaring and stomping horde that's coming at her with Krotch at the lead.

She swerves out of the reach of a particularly swift Avvar before making a beeline straight for Cassandra and Blackwall, who are charging at the horde with taunts of their own. She has a brief glimpse of Cassandra's expression, focused and clear, eyes sharp as a hawk's. Blackwall is cold, almost detached, and yet utterly murderous — in a kind of transcendent battle rage.

She passes between them at a dead run, hoping that the two can stall Hand on Krotch and give the rest of the team a chance to pick off the supporting cast of rampaging barbarians at long range. There's another pile of debris, about half-way between where she is and Solas's position. Their eyes meet, and for a brief moment, in the eerie glow of another spell, he looks entirely otherworldly to her, like some ancient demiurge, too outside of the bounds of habitual thought to comprehend beyond the stark, breathtaking, terrifying beauty of his sheer otherness. And then she blinks and the illusion breaks, and it is just Solas again, bloodied, dirty, features drawn with fatigue and magical depletion. He mouths something at her, but she can't hear the words over the din of battle, so he nods towards the pile of rubble with a quick gesture that Margo decides means something like "I'll cover you."

She scrambles to the pile of debris and fishes out a lyrium potion. She holds it aloft for the elf to see, then she tosses it. Solas catches the vial easily with his left hand, and then uncorks it and downs the contents right away. A moment later a blue glow bursts around her, and the air prickles briefly, the iodine scent like the distant memory of the ocean — there, then gone. Margo picks up another stone, just in time to notice two Avvar slowing down, at the outer range of Solas's spells. She hurls her rock, aiming at the warrior on the right while he's jumping away from a lightning bolt that scorches the ground half-a-step from him. The rock hits him in the jaw with a satisfying

crunch, swirling him around. And then Jan steps out of another shadow — nifty trick, that — and drives his dirk up, under the Avvar's chin. The warrior falls, his body twitching spasmodically even after Jan retrieves his weapon, and Margo swallows back a wave of nausea.

The other Avvar fails to step out of the lightning bolt's way, which, really, she can't fault him for. How the hell are you supposed to dodge lightning?

"The Herald!"

Margo whips around, just in time to see Varric gesture in the direction of where Evie and Vivienne are holed up. Hand on Krotch is otherwise occupied with Cassandra and Blackwall — which is precisely what Margo had hoped would happen — but the remaining Avvar have stopped following their brilliant leader. Instead, they have clearly figured out who the weakest link might be, and they are going for it.

The dwarf changes something in Bianca's configuration and releases a volley of bolts into the group of goons, screaming through the crossbow's visibly brutal recoil.

Solas takes off at a run in the direction of Vivienne and Evie, and after a second of hesitation Margo follows him, Jan on her heels — behind, and a little to the right. Shit. It's possible that if they stay just at the perimeter of Evie's hexing force field, they might still fight effectively. Varric is far enough that it doesn't seem to be affecting him.

Margo gets a glimpse of Vivienne. Her face is twisted in strained annoyance: almost every single spell — except for the blue barrier one, and some other weird, fussy looking thing that draws icy hieroglyphs on the ground some ten feet ahead of her — seems to fizzle and fail.

Solas, now at the outskirts of Evie's jinxing bubble, hesitates for a brief moment — and then he resumes his forward momentum. Margo's eyes widen. What the hell is the elf doing? "Solas!" she screams. Perhaps he thinks it's narrower than it is.

He turns around, barely breaking his stride. "Have to... spread it around. Stay out!" he barks back.

Ah, fuck. Because, of course, he must have figured it out too — that Evie's vortex of ill-luck is a zero sum game, and that the more bodies there are to siphon from, the better the individual odds are. Margo wonders briefly what would happen if no one was around at all — would Evie survive an attack? Would fortune, in fact bend ex nihilo? But of course, she can't make that bet. And she's pretty sure Solas came to the same conclusion.

She should stop Jan from coming into the perimeter. A quick glance back at the rogue, and she can see that the elfroot potion is waning, that the damage is beginning to catch up to him again. If luck is a finite quantity, his is running out fast. She needs to keep him out. And then, she looks at Evie's terrified, focused, tear-streaked face. At Varric's clenched jaw as his hands work another bolt into the crossbow. At Vivienne, who suddenly looks ten years older. And at the elf.

When Margo makes the decision, it feels like something inside her, in some place she's never paid much attention to stretches, and then snaps. She doesn't stop the rogue. Instead, she lets her legs carry her forward, and into the space of the hex.

The next five minutes of Margo's life are a blur. Later, she remembers some of it — brief, decontextualized details, like flashes frozen by a strobe light. She remembers the way blood explodes from a puncture wound in Varric's shoulder, and it looks much redder than you'd think. She remembers the singed hair smell of Vivienne's failed spells, three in a row, as the woman screams through the agony of whatever happens when *magica* runs out, and the mage pushes her

body beyond the limits of its abilities. She remembers Solas's eyes — something almost mineral about their color in a face paler than paper — when the elf drives the bottom of his staff into the back of the man about to lobe off Margo's head. Nothing magical about that. She remembers what the tip of a sword looks like when it comes out on the wrong side of Jan's torso, about two inches to the left of the spine. She remembers the gristly pop and easy give of driving her shiv into the neck of the Avvar lifting Evie off the ground by the throat. She remembers the searing pain of a blade slashing across her thigh.

And she remembers Evie's tear-streaked face and blood-covered armor, not a single drop of it her own.

When it's all over, she finds herself in a heap on the floor, Blackwall, of all people, tying a tourniquet around her upper thigh with a leather belt. Probably his own.

"Mage!" he calls out, his voice harsh and urgent, and then, on the other side, Solas materializes, his palms, smeared with blood, pressed against the wound. He drives his magic into her body with too much force and Blackwall recoils from the static discharge. "Easy there, fella," he soothes, like one might a cornered animal.

Margo turns her head to Solas. "Help Jan. It might not be too late. He still must have some of the tonic in his system..."

She sees it then, in the subtle shift in his facial expression, a softening around his eyes. He shakes his head once. "I'm sorry, da'nas. He's gone."

The howl never makes it past her lips. Instead, it drives itself inward, settling into her bones.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by the zero-sum game, and the fact that in this story, luck is a finite resource.

Next up: Aftermath, burials, and a tense conversation that has a slightly unexpected result.

Memento Mori

Chapter Summary

In which Margo tries to find some privacy, and instead finds an irritable elf (and a little extra)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There is some debate about whether or not to rehabilitate the old keep. In the end, the powers that be decide that the undead make too much of a deterrent. Harding and a group of scouts join them belatedly, with a terse report about mage hostiles — apparently neutralized — to the south-east. The news that they are set to head back to Haven at the end of the next day is met with quiet cheers.

Margo spots Amund among the faces at the makeshift camp they set up in the keep's upper courtyard — after cleaning the grounds of dead Avvar. She is not surprised to see him. When he notices her, the shaman inclines his head and makes his way over. He smells distinctly of death and raw meat, and Margo concludes he must have been carrying out the funeral rights for his people.

“Your dead scream too loud inside you, Outworlder,” he comments, dark eyes fixed on the skies, where the Breach cannot be seen. “You must not hold the dead too close. You let one in, then all the others come along. Do you wish me to help you with the offerings?”

Margo, who can feel the scream vibrating under her skin with nowhere to go, opens her mouth to answer, and then she shakes her head instead. The Avvar keeps staring at the sky, silent and patient, and clearly not satisfied with her silence. “I suspect Jan would have wanted an Andrastean funeral,” she finally says.

He shrugs and walks off without another word.

They burn their dead — lest they rise again, like the *vámpíriok* of Baba's tales. Two casualties: Jan, and one of the imprisoned Inquisition soldiers, who, from what Margo can tell, succumbed to sepsis.

Blackwall, Amund, and Cassandra help build the funeral platforms, mostly from the random wood they find around the abandoned fort. Harding has somehow managed to save most of the blood lotus haul, and Margo spends an hour huddled by a small fire pit, making the extract to ensure the pyres burn hot. It feels like the most insufficient thing in the world. She moves through the tasks like a zombie, making the necessary motions, but focusing all her energy on keeping the scream from breaking through her skin.

At one point Blackwall comes to sit next to her. The Warden says little. Instead, he packs a small clay pipe with a fragrant melange of herbs and what is probably a local variant of tobacco, his movements methodical and unhurried.

“I still remember the first time I lost a friend in battle,” he comments finally, his voice pitched low,

the sound swallowed by the thick, sulfurous mist that rolls over the marsh. Margo is abstractly glad that he doesn't phrase it as a question. With some small part of her mind not occupied with managing the internal howl, Margo realizes that this odd bearded man probably knows her better than any of the others, simply by dint of training with her every single day, and of carefully identifying all her ticks, hang-ups, and hesitations. War has its own language.

"Does it get easier?" she asks.

He shrugs. "Not particularly. Just duller. It'll feel like you have blades under your skin, but it'll pass." He stays silent for a while. "My advice is, get back to Haven, and get fucking drunk." He huffs a humorless chuckle into his beard, but his eyes crease with sadness rather than mirth. "My treat. Bull and Sera might even pitch in some bits, I'd wager. Mostly just to see you sloshed."

Margo manages a reluctant chuckle, but then she nods. All in all, sounds like solid advice to her. Whatever helps keep the scream contained.

Evening comes. They ignite the pyres under the endless icy drizzle. Cassandra, as the closest to an Andrastean ritual specialist, says a prayer for the dead. The words wash over Margo like a wave — an abstract force, without underlying meaning. Once the bodies are swallowed up by the flames, she walks off, her mind blank, her only care to keep the howl caged inside.

She's not sure how she ends up on the ramparts at the outer edge of the fortress. There's a locked door there, and Margo digs through her pockets until she locates the skeleton key. It doesn't even begin to budge the lock's mechanism. In fact, it doesn't fit, and this, somehow, feels only proper.

"Da'nas." A quiet, yet somehow steely appellation. "Abandoning the funeral so soon?"

Margo pivots slowly away from the door. She has seen Solas around the camp, of course, but he has not approached her after the end of the battle, nor she him. The injury to her thigh was almost mended by the time they were out of that accursed hall, and she got it the rest of the way with good old elfroot and the obligatory unspecified fungus.

She stares at the elf, the internal scream barely contained. She can't really make out his features in the damp gloom, but there is something tense about the way he is carrying himself, a kind of banked anger.

Oh, she doesn't have time for mercurial temper tantrums. Not today.

"Enjoying a stroll?" Margo squares her shoulders. She realizes she's a hair away from a fighting stance, but somehow she can't snap herself out of it. "There's a truly spectacular view of some undead dipshits down there, if you want to take a look."

Because, really, there is. Spectacular. Undead dipshits everywhere, just shuffling around.

Whatever it is about her tone — or her body language — it just seems to antagonize him further. Solas glides towards her, and the usually casual, meditative movement toggles effortlessly into its opposite. There's something predatory to it now.

He comes to stand a few feet away, blocking her path from the rampart, but then he turns towards the bog beyond the wall, his face in profile. "Yes. A truly spectacular view, if you find grotesque reminders of the nonsensical fragility of life appealing."

Margo bristles. If he thinks she's in the mood for cryptic charades, he's got another thing coming. "Yes, that pesky transience," she replies caustically, not even sure why she's angry — or angry with him in particular — but unable to stop herself. "Won't lie — if I'd known that your

world's reminders of one's mortality came with shambling, I'd..." She cuts herself off. What would she have done, exactly? It's not like she chose this.

Or did she?

Let me through.

Solas turns to her then. His facial expression feels like something untenable. Heat beneath the ice. "I will not buffer this death wish of yours any longer, da'nas. It is pointless coddling. If your existence in this world appalls you so thoroughly that you are determined to throw it away at every opportunity, then so be it. I will not interfere."

Margo just gapes at him. "Are you fucking kidding me, elf?" she finally manages. "As I recall, you were the one running into the hex! Pot — kettle, pleased to meet you!"

He takes another predatory step towards her. "Oh, it is just 'elf' now? And what do you think you are nowadays? What sort of body do you believe you inhabit?" he bites out, and she's surprised that his words don't crystalize and fall down as soon as they pass his lips — considering his icy tone.

She's so profoundly furious then — at him, at herself, at the whole stupid debacle with the Avvar, at the goddamn bog with its never ending rain, and at Evie's vampirical jinx bubble, that she has trouble arranging speech into anything more than monosyllabic expressions of rage.

She steps right in front of the elf — too close for polite, but, at this stage, she couldn't care less. Solas doesn't back down. He looms over her instead, this side of overtly menacing. Margo points a finger at his chest. "What I am is someone who doesn't change the subject, or deflect, or start evasive maneuvers as soon as something remotely complicated rears its head!" Well. Maybe she's still sore at the whole pleasantly polite thing. Then again, they have bigger fish to fry. She can deal with the cold shoulder — but the hypocrisy is a bit rich. "Clearly, you understand how the mark and its hexing vortex worked. I have no more of a 'death wish' than you do, so do not patronize me." There. A multiclausal and somewhat coherent sentence. That should do.

"You have no idea what you are trifling with." Delivered with something halfway between amazement and resignation, which, somehow, pisses her off even more. Condescending fucking elf. Margo's tone drops into the acidic but studiously polite sarcasm of academic theory debate, which, truly, is not something she'd wish on her worst enemy, because from there, it's no holds barred.

"Then do enlighten me, by all means. Unless you came all the way out here to pick a fight over having to spend a little extra *magica* on healing me, in which case — do accept my sincere apologies. I'll make sure to pack more potions next time we are kidnapped so as not to impose on your labor overly much."

A kind of tremor goes through him, and then he grips her shoulders, and backs her into the wall, eyes, hot as coals, on hers. Margo stares into his face, and realizes vaguely that taunting him at this point is neither wise nor helpful — for either of them — but she can't quite help herself, because that thing is still screaming from under her skin, and whatever might drown it out is fair game. She meets his gaze as one would an adversary's, her jaw tight. She's pretty sure the elf growls. One of his hands firsts into her hair. It cushions the back of her head against the wood, but that's epiphenomenal — he uses her braid to angle her face up. Margo, who by then is in a burn all the bridges (and maybe blow up whatever's left for good measure) kind of mood, raises an eyebrow in challenge. He hooks the other hand into the belt of her leather trousers, knuckles cool against her skin, and pulls her against him.

And then he presses her into the wall and kisses her like a man starved.

The kiss is as chaotic as the mood — their teeth scrape together, and it takes them a few seconds to catch each other's rhythm. And then it's a mess of lips, and tongues, and hands trying to find skin to touch, and coming up on entirely too much armor and clothing in the way.

He breaks away abruptly. The hand that's not in her hair comes up to her neck, palm against the curve of her throat, fingers tightening ever so slightly. And then his lips find the hollow over the pulse point, just under her jaw. It's more bite than kiss, just shy of painful, and firm enough for adrenaline to mix in with the rest of the hormonal chaos. It goes straight to her core. A harsh breath escapes her, and Margo arches her spine, bringing her hips flush against him. He drives her back into the wall, a thigh pressing between her legs and forcing her to widen her stance. And then his mouth is on hers again, stealing her breath.

She's not sure what makes her regain her wits. Maybe it's the glazed expression in Solas's eyes that likely mirrors her own — anger mixed with lust, of course, but underneath it, an odd, inarticulate, complicated anguish that finds neither escape nor lexis. Or maybe it's the fact that she's had enough death in her life — and enough grief-fueled messy, emotionally wrenching sex in its wake — to recognize exactly what sort of path they've embarked upon. Or perhaps, after most of their more intimate encounters happened in the Fade, where she never experienced her dreamworld body as something other-than-hers, this feels too fundamentally different. Here, in the all too real drenching rain of the deathly bog, the unfamiliar triggers and predilections of her new reincarnation give every touch a vertiginous kind of "first time" quality that keeps her from zoning out and going blindly through the motions.

Or maybe it's just that, when it's all said and done, she likes him too damn much to use him in that way.

Margo tries to slow down, changing the register from frenzied to tender. It turns out to be no easy task, not without false starts. She succumbs to temptation, and nibbles at his lower lip, and he responds immediately, pressing her harder against the wall, his hands sliding down to her ass, his mouth on her neck again. She bucks against him, and grazes his earlobe with her teeth — because, well... it's right there anyway, might as well do something about it. She can feel the moan deep in his chest, against her ribcage, and she isn't entirely sure who the sound belongs to. But then, she forces herself to bring her hands to his cheeks — and away from trying to work out how to unfasten his belt — and wipes the rain away with her thumbs. She's not sure he'll follow her cues, because, at this point, they're both almost too far gone to stop. But, after a few long moments, he does.

They stay tangled up — carefully, precariously still, not daring to move against each other, but also unwilling, or just plain unable, to come apart. At length, their breathing calms and the wildness drains out of them both. The kiss that follows turns into something deep, but slow, like the current of some wide, unhurried river. When they come up for breath, Solas moves his hands to cup the back of her head, gently this time, and brings their foreheads together. And then, after a second of hesitation, she responds by rubbing the tip of her nose against his.

When he looks down at her, the glaze is gone from his eyes. His face is a strange combination of shock, bewilderment, and uncertainty — and a kind of longing she doesn't really know how to interpret beyond recognizing something similar in herself, a sharp constriction that feels like vertigo and heartbreak, all rolled into one.

"Oh, letha'laim, forgive me. I..." He swallows. "I got carried away."

She's not sure which part he's apologizing for — the argument, or what followed. A little chuckle that bears an awfully close resemblance to a sob escapes her. "See? Just like stuffing plants in a

sack.”

It takes him a second to connect the dots, and then she gets a surprised, rueful little smile, and he shakes his head.

“If this is what your experience of ‘stuffing plants in a sack’ is like, then I am surprised you noticed the wolves at all. I think I may have willingly chosen to get eaten.” And the statement almost launches Margo into resuming their activities, because this is the first time the flirt doesn’t feel like a superficial, cheeky provocation for the fun of it. This time, it has real heat behind it.

Slowly, he steps back, and Margo shivers from the sudden chill of his absence. “But you are right. This... This was indefensible. It must stop.”

Margo meets his gaze then. “I never said that.” And because she’s pretty sure he’s about to back-pedal in panic, she steps closer, bridging the distance between them, and encircles his waist with her arms. That should make the fleeing in terror a little more cumbersome, she decides. “What I do think, first off, is that we really can do better than this. Let’s not make Varric’s day and reenact a ‘Maile does Tevinter’ with a cameo from the living dead.”

His eyebrows draw together. “Sometimes, ma da’nas, I truly have no idea what you are saying. Though, based on your earlier speech to the Avvar chieftling, I am fairly certain that the statement is at least somewhat scandalous.”

She chuckles. “What I am trying to say is that you can’t drown existential dread in angry sex. Speaking from experience, existential dread has amazing buoyancy. It just won’t sink. Also, it tends to make for awkward morning afters, which multiply the existential dread in the process. Which, in turn, is kind of the opposite of the desired effect.” She realizes she’s babbling again, but at least the scream inside doesn’t lacerate at her quite as much anymore.

Solas hesitates, then he brings his own arms around her, and rests his chin against the top of her head. She huddles into him, ear against the hollow of his throat, and listens to the accelerated, but slowing heartbeat. They stand like that for a while, until the rain begins to drip in unpleasant little rivulets down the collar of Margo’s armor.

Eventually, he steps back, hands on her shoulders, and peers down at her. Night has fallen, but she can still see his face in the eerie, iridescent glow of the bog.

Of course, the thrice-bedamned thing would phosphoresce.

“What ails you, Margo?” That feeling again of him tasting her name for its hidden properties. “Truly? You lost a friend, but I doubt it is just that. Or... you and the rogue had been close?”

She notices the slight hitch of hesitation on ‘close’ and shakes her head. “I think we were comrades. But no, nothing like that. It’s...” The task of trying to encapsulate the sheer enormity of the clusterfuck they’re in feels like an impossible proposition. Or to capture exactly the sticky, hollow, inescapable feeling of guilt at having stolen another’s life, however justifiably.

She turns it around instead. “I’m not the only one who came out here with swords swinging. As much as I’d like to flatter myself in believing that this was all because you worry over me, I’m pretty sure that’s not all there is to it. What ails you, Solas?”

She can hear the sigh, and his shoulders slump a little. “I do worry over you, ma da’nas. There is no flattery to it. It is a simple fact. For better or for worse, you have imbricated me into your predicament, and to absolve myself of the responsibility it carries would be...

disingenuous. Though that, of course, is not the sole reason for my concern." The ghost of a familiar cheeky smirk flashes across his features. "And I would appreciate it if you gave me less cause to fret."

She smiles. Really, warm and fuzzies? You're still there?

"But you are correct." He pauses, seemingly gathering his thoughts, or perhaps formulating an answer. Good on him for trying, Margo thinks to herself. "Whatever causes the fortune-bending aura — whether it is intrinsic to the mark or to the Herald herself — we must assume that channelling more magic into it will have unpredictable and potentially disastrous consequences."

Margo's eyes widen. Of course. She hadn't even considered this, too focused on the minutia of their recent fights. The Breach. If Evie is to close the Breach, it stands to reason that powering the mark would amplify the jinxing forcefield. She cannot even imagine what effects this might have, but, considering the evidence, there is no reason to think that anything good will come of it. It is most likely to cause some kind of apocalyptic event.

She frowns. "So, really, what you're saying is that we're all very likely fucked anyway, pardon my Orlesian," she summarizes.

"Orlesians would use a slightly different expression, but the meaning certainly remains. Yes."

Ah. Well, that puts existential dread in a whole new perspective.

Before she can respond, Solas cocks his head to the side, listening. She follows his lead — and, sure enough, she can hear someone walking up the staircase to the ramparts. Several someones, in fact, because strands of conversation drift to where they are standing.

"... do we have to do this now, Hero? Vintage Warden shit is all well and good, but it's late, and I for one, wouldn't mind a night cap and some sleep."

"It shouldn't take long. I just need you to pick the lock."

That's Blackwall, and he sounds like he will not be deterred.

"Blackwall is right. If we are to leave tomorrow, there is no sense in mounting a separate expedition just for this. I, for one, can't leave this awful bog fast enough."

"Aww, what's not to like, Seeker? Besides, it's not the place, it's the company." Varric, mocking.

Margo looks at her companion. "Do we own it? Or do we go hide behind those sacks over there?"

He gives her a quick, critical once over. His eyes linger on her neck for a few seconds, and his expression turns a little guilty. "Hmm. Your collar is short, and I do not currently have the magica to fix this."

Oh great. The elf left her a souvenir. "No chance it'll just pass for a battle bruise?"

He shakes his head, and purses his lips in what looks suspiciously like a little smile. "Not a one, unfortunately."

Margo nods. "We will never hear the end of it. Sacks it is."

This chapter was brought to you by the excessive buoyancy of existential dread.

Next up: Busted! Also, discussions with Varric, who always has impeccable timing

Complicated

Chapter Summary

In which Margo, Solas, and Varric discuss bad luck.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“All right, Hero. Happy now? I believe we got everything.”

The noises are difficult to interpret from their makeshift shelter. There is a vexed "oof," which Margo identifies as the universal sound for something heavy being lifted. A curse follows — one that invokes an unspecified creator deity's hairy nether regions — and something hits the cobblestones with a muted "clang."

“It's denser than it looks.” Blackwall sounds none too pleased.

“Do you require assistance, Warden?” Cassandra, with a trace of sarcasm in her voice.

“No, Lady Cassandra. I'll manage. Wouldn't mind if you—”

“Yes, yes. I'll carry the torch.”

Shuffling.

The barricade of burlap behind which they are wedged doesn't offer the best acoustics, but Margo allows herself a moment of cautious optimism. The trio got what they were looking for — why Varric felt the need to stand guard at the door while the other two were searching the room is beyond her, but, at last, it seems that they might be on their way. She steals a quick glance at Solas. The elf is sitting cross-legged next to her, his back propped against whatever's contained in the sacks — the substance has the consistency of cement, and offers about as much cushioning. Despite their ridiculous predicament, Solas's expression remains placid and vaguely amused.

Bastard.

“Varric? Are you coming?”

More shuffling.

“Actually, Seeker, I think I'm going to stick around and look through those crates one more time.”

A skeptically disapproving “hmpf” from Cassandra, and something that sounds a whole lot like “greedy little man.”

“What was that, now?”

“I always forget, Varric, that you are, first and foremost, a thief.”

“You wound me, Seeker, I'm an upstanding businessman. Besides, if it doesn't belong to anyone, it isn't stealing.”

“Lady Cassandra, with due respect, I’d rather not keep holding this thing forever. I’m sure Master Tethras will join us once he’s done satisfying his acquisitiveness.”

Damn the avaricious dwarf.

“I will remind you, Varric, that you now answer to the Inquisition. Therefore, anything you should find that would benefit us should be turned over into the Inquisition’s possession. And *not* pocketed.”

“I promise that if I find anything relevant, you’ll be the first to know.”

Margo looks at the elf again. He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. And then he reaches for her braid, arranging it to fall over her shoulder, and incidentally concealing the side of her neck that bears the incriminating evidence. He nods, apparently satisfied with the results.

Well then. She supposes he doesn’t share her optimism. In either case, until Varric leaves, she supposes they’re stuck.

Two sets of footsteps retreat, echoing down the stairs. And then, silence.

“All right, you two. They’re gone. You can come out now.”

Of course.

Solas cocks an eyebrow in question, and Margo is suddenly struck by the profound absurdity of the situation. In fact, it reminds her of the time when, at fourteen or fifteen, she snuck back into the house past curfew, only to come upon Baba, who, naturally, had been waiting patiently at the kitchen table, shelling beans. Baba had given her a quick once-over, nodded at the fresh hickey on her neck, and declared in a conversational tone: “The next time the boy feels the need to mark his territory, tell him I have a nice rowan in the yard he’s free to piss on whenever the mood strikes him.” And that had been the end of that conversation, safe for an angelica seed tea added to Margo’s morning breakfast routine.

She suppresses a fit of giggles and stands up to face the music. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Solas unfolding from his sitting position.

“Well, well.” Varric cocks his head, eyes narrowing in performative puzzlement. “All right. I just have to ask. Not that I don’t understand the appeal of a romantic escapade, but... why *here*? Really? I know, I know — this place is a hole in general, but there are probably better accommodations to be found than...” He makes a vague gesture meant to encompass their particular surroundings. “Whatever this is. So, walk me through how this works. Purely out of authorial interest — for my next book.”

Apparently, Thedas has not yet discovered the joy of gothic romances, and Margo decides that she is not about to give the local best-selling author any ideas on the subject.

“Whatever do you mean, Varric? We simply needed a quiet place to talk strategy.” Solas somehow manages to make the statement sound simultaneously completely innocent and thoroughly dirty.

“Oh, ho ho! Is that what they call it nowadays?” Varric swaggers over to their hiding spot. He sits on one of the burlap sacks closer to the ground, and rests the giant crossbow across his knees. “So. Our mysterious apostate is going to own up to what he’s been up to when no one’s looking? Or did he have a change of heart? Unless, that is, our alchemist *did* slip him something?”

Margo groans. “Varric, is this really necessary?”

The dwarf grins, entirely unrepentant. "Just trying to stay faithful to the demands of the genre, Prickly. But wait... that gives me an idea. Do you mean to say that all those times the advisors have been locking themselves in that war room of theirs to 'discuss strategy'..." The rogue's expression turns speculative. "You know what, this has narrative potential. I should really talk to my editor."

"Was there something you needed, Varric? Aside from dubious literary inspiration, that is?" Solas looks entirely unperturbed — and pleasantly polite. Margo bites the inside of her cheek to hide the smile. Well. As long as she is not on the receiving end of said pleasant politeness — or of the underhanded sarcasm — she doesn't have much quarrel with the phenomenon.

"Ah, but inspiration is a fickle mistress, Chuckles — I'm not one to argue with her mysterious ways." The dwarf winks.

The incessant teasing *is* annoying, but aside from that, Varric has been a steadfast ally for her on this side of the cosmic membrane. One way or another, of all the people she could imagine discussing the hex with first, he is the obvious choice. If only he'd reign in the smarminess.

Time to reroute. "Varric, I've been meaning to ask. How's Bianca?"

Varric stills, his eyes narrowing suspiciously, and Margo files the reaction away for examination at a later date. Could it be that the crossbow has an eponymous living counterpart?

"What do you mean, Prickly?"

Margo offers him an innocent smile. "Your crossbow. Are you still experiencing occasional aiming issues?"

Varric's expression turns from teasing to deadly serious. "All right. So you weren't kidding. You really want to talk business."

Margo hesitates for a second, then she nods. It still doesn't feel altogether comfortable — like a small betrayal of Evie's trust. But she supposes that if the situation is as dire as they suspect, then the necessity to formulate a working solution is more pressing. She'll sit Evie down at the first opportunity she gets.

"And you, Chuckles? You're having similar concerns?"

Solas inclines his head to the side. "You have seen our last fight, Varric. I have similar concerns regarding my ability to cast reliably — and it would seem that others are equally affected."

Varric's thumb taps a distracted rhythm against the polished wood of his crossbow. He stares absentmindedly into the murky courtyard below. "To be honest, I was still hoping it might all be in my head. Prickly, you noticed it ever since the rift in the Hinterlands, didn't you?" Margo nods in confirmation. The dwarf turns to Solas with a grim expression. "I've seen watching you try to work around it since then. I'm also pretty sure the Seeker has noticed, but, to be honest, I couldn't quite work up the courage to ask her outright — in case she decides I've finally lost it. It doesn't help that it's not bad every skirmish. The one in Redcliffe's chantry with the Tevinter fellow went... decently enough."

Margo's ears prick at the mention of a "Tevinter fellow." Were they fighting Tevinter mages?

"Or at least not poorly enough to be noteworthy." Solas's voice is thoughtful, and Margo supposes that he is trying to work out the implications of the differences between the skirmishes.

“Yeah. Her Heraldship kept messing with the rift, and the rift kept messing with the demons, so all in all, we did fine. But this past one was...”

“We barely survived,” Solas finishes for him.

“Yeah. And some of us didn’t.” Varric meets Margo’s gaze. “Sorry, Prickly.”

She nods again through a jolt of guilt that shoots through that part of her she never had to really contend with before.

“So. What’s the common denominator?”

It is clear to Margo that the dwarf’s question is rhetorical — one that he knows the answer to. And yet, he wants a confirmation — the paradoxical desire for the definitive diagnosis. Margo looks at Solas, whose pleasantly polite mask has morphed into another expression, one that she has seen before without actively classifying it. The best she can come up with is “resignation,” although she has a sense that it is less situational, and more intrinsic to the elf’s very nature. A kind of profound, rooted fatalism.

Varric, for whatever reason, is looking to her for the answer, and she almost resents him for it. “The main common denominator is Evie,” she finally says.

The rogue nods thoughtfully. “That much, I’d figured. What I can’t work out is what causes the variations. Because this shit isn’t bad all the time. So what else?”

“We believe it is a hex of sorts, centered on the Herald. If I were to speculate, I would say the fluctuations are related to the intensity of the fight. Whether caused by the mark or by something else, it appears to deflect danger from her at the expense of siphoning luck away from her allies.”

Even before Solas has a chance to finish his explanation, Varric is nodding his understanding. “Yeah, that sounds about right. Except I don’t understand how it manages to affect arrows. I mean, I can see how it might affect my aim — but Bianca?” He shakes his head. “Have you come across anything like this before, Chuckles?”

“I have not — though, in itself, this means little. Magic could take any number of forms — Tevinter magic is distinct from what is taught in the southern Circles, Nevarran magic differs from what is practiced by the Dalish... And there are always those who experiment.”

“Prickly, what about you? Not that you’re a magical specialist, and I don’t know how much of your memory has returned. But at this point, any little bit might help.”

Margo thinks. The idea of the luck siphon is in fact perfectly familiar: it is at the heart of almost all cosmologies of witchcraft. Whether you want to call it a hex, a curse, or the evil eye, the concept can be found in most cultural traditions she’s familiar with. But in her world, magic, if it exists, is a quiet, unassuming sort of thing — in other words, nothing like it is here. And it stands to reason that something that works in a quiet, unassuming sort of way — even if, to her inexperienced eye, its effects still seem spectacular — could almost escape notice, eclipsed by the more flashy magic practiced in Thedas.

Except that the Avvar shaman had some similar ideas. “Could it be Avvar?” she finally asks.

Solas raises his eyebrows. Varric cocks his head to the side with a puzzled expression.

“I am unfamiliar with Avvar culture,” Solas volunteers. “But it would seem that their priests and their mages are one and the same.”

Margo nods. “The big Avvar who decided to join up with us — Amund — I think he was the one who helped get us out of the cell, too.” The thought brings up the memory of her encounter with Imshael, and Margo represses a shiver. “He had mentioned something about luck. He posed it as a... conceptual problem. Or a riddle of sorts.”

Varric’s squint turns guarded. “You know, Prickly, you sure talk fancy for a little scrap of an elven rogue.”

She offers the dwarf a tight smile. “Chuck it up to an obsessive reading habit.”

Varric chuckles. “That, I can’t fault you for. So. The Avvar you said?”

Margo nods. “He asked me why two hunters on the same hunt might have radically different luck, where one gets mauled by a bear, and the other escapes unscathed.” She pauses, trying to extrapolate the implications. “I think you can expand on that — why does one hunter bring game back regularly, and the other can’t? Is it always because the first hunter is better?”

“Do you believe this to be merely religious reasoning, or a model that reflects a practical approach?” Solas asks. Margo shoots him a quick look. His face bears the now familiar expression of intellectual curiosity. He’s got it. This is really the heart of the question. She finds herself smiling up at him.

There is something very soft about the elf’s return gaze, there then gone again — hidden behind the mask of amiable aloofness.

Margo forces her thoughts into a semblance of order, and away from a sudden and very distracting memory of recent events. In particular since the culprit of said distraction is standing right there, sporting a quietly speculative expression — and looking, at this particular moment, impossibly charming.

“When you two are done with the lingering looks, can we return to the matter at hand?” There’s not much bite to Varric’s sarcasm this time. In fact, he sounds like an indulgent grandparent, gently chiding two particularly rambunctious kids.

Margo hopes the blush isn’t too visible in the greenish glow of the bog. They were talking about something relevant before the blasted warm and fuzzies launched their stealth attack. What was it? Ah. Witchcraft. Luck. Avvar cosmology. “I think it’s practical first — though they do sound like they have a complex theory of spirit relations that overlays the practicality.”

“Wait, Prickly. Don’t the Avvar worship demons?” There is very obvious distaste in Varric’s question.

“I doubt they *worship* demons,” Solas offers. “Although it is likely that the Avvar have their own system of transacting with the denizens of the Fade. As do mages everywhere — even when all they have been taught is hostility and fear, it is impossible to avoid interacting with spirits entirely.”

Margo finds herself nodding. What had Amund called Imshael? A wishmonger god. “Yes. I think they call them gods, but I don’t think the relationship is one of worshipping, exactly. Not, at least, in the Chantry sense of the term.” She taps her finger against her lips, trying to think about how to articulate the difference. When she looks up, Solas quickly averts his eyes, pretending to gaze over the marsh. She suppresses a smile. Oh, sure, undead shit, still walking about aimlessly in glowing muck — fascinating stuff, that.

Varric just shakes his head.

All right. They're all adults. She has a damn doctorate, for crying out loud. Time to get her shit together. "I don't know if spirits are the only gods the Avvar have, or if it's a more encompassing category." Margo tries to remember whether the shaman had said anything about what happens to ancestors. Do Avvar ancestors become place spirits, in the way that they sometimes do in Earth's shamanic traditions? Or do they reincarnate? Or go to some other, better place — an afterlife of sorts? She'll have to track Amund down and pick his brain once she has a spare moment. "My point is that, for the Avvar, luck is not a random, unknowable quantity. It's something to negotiate over with their gods. And it's read as a kind of message — misfortune is taken to be a sign of a god's ill favor, and therefore a reminder to reestablish a good relationship, as it were."

"See, Prickly, this is where we get into complicated theological shit, and I get nervous. Because this whole thing..." another vague gesture, but one that encompasses the sky this time "...feels to me like a pretty giant sign of the Maker's ill favor — of the 'screw you' variety — and I have a feeling he's not the negotiating type."

"The important question," Solas offers, returning them to the problem at hand, "is whether the luck-bending aura is something that precedes the Herald's acquisition of the mark."

Varric's eyes widen. "Shit, Chuckles. Are you saying what I think you're saying? Because if the kid had her... 'luck suck' when the Conclave exploded... Andraste's Silky Knickers." He shakes his head, his expression suddenly queasy. "I guess it'd explain why she survived. Just don't let Roderick catch wind of it." The dwarf rubs his face with both hands. "You know what, I'd much rather assume that it came with that green glowing thing on her hand until we learn otherwise. But I suppose we do need to find out how long this has been going on. Prickly, you're in the best position to ask her Heraldship. I think she's noticed that at least the three of us — Seeker included — have been giving her funny looks, and I don't want the kid to get defensive or evasive about it."

"Do you think she knows? You've fought alongside her a lot more than I have. Is she aware that there is a problem?"

"Oh, she's aware that there's a problem. She apologizes profusely after every fight for being clumsy and getting underfoot. But I personally don't think the kid realizes what the problem *is*. She knows she's not trained for combat. Which in itself is pretty damn strange, if you think about it — what in the Void was Trevelyan senior thinking? Why didn't the kid get proper military training?"

Margo looks to Solas, who is balancing back and forth on the balls of his feet. "Why would you find her lack of training strange, Varric? A noble's youngest daughter might not garner much attention, overlooked in favor of his older children or his sons."

"See, Chuckles, that's where you're wrong. That's not how nobles go about things. First off, you always train all of them, in case something happens to the heir. And second, it's not like the younger kids have anything better to do — the reason they get thorough training is to keep them busy, and out of the parents' way."

Margo nods in agreement. "For what it's worth, I don't believe Evie was overlooked. My impression was quite the opposite — that her father was overprotective and... omnipresent, for lack of a better word. She does cite the guy every three sentences, like he is the final authority on any topic known to man."

"And *that's* what's been bugging me, Prickly. Think about it. Youngest daughter, no military training, not exactly the paragon of social finesse. And yet, she gets sent to the Conclave. What was she *doing* there?"

“That is an interesting question.” Solas's eyes narrow in speculation. “It would seem, lethallan, that it falls on you to find out more about the Herald. For now, let us hope that the answer to her peculiar properties lies in her past, and not in the magic of the mark. I fear that should it be the latter, it would bode badly for our prospects at the Breach.”

Varric sighs again. “Well, shit. I haven't considered that. And here I thought we were having problems now.”

By the time the three of them come off the rampart, the camp is quiet. Solas bids them goodnight first, with a soft “sleep well” in Margo’s direction that sounds somewhere between a question and a suggestion. Varric lingers for a few moments, watching the elf walk away towards one of the tents.

“What’s going on, Varric?” Margo asks, since the dwarf is obviously waiting to have a private word.

“Listen, Prickly. I know I like to tease you two — can’t resist, you both get so damn flustered about it. But... Look. I can tell ‘complicated’ when I see it. I'm not judging, mind. But... be careful.”

Margo frowns. “I appreciate the advice Varric, but... what do you mean? By complicated?”

Varric chuckles humorlessly. “Just that the Nightingale likes to have a nice selection of strings to pull on, from what I can tell. Let me give you an example. Last time we were in Redcliffe, we picked up this Tevinter mage — well, more accurately, he picked us. He hasn’t officially joined yet — guess it all depends on whether Evie ends up getting the mages or the Templars involved — but he’s been hanging around, to the spymaster's great irritation. He sounds pretty sincere to me, but he’s a Vint, as Bull would have it.” Varric sighs. “Anyway, since you now have a reputation as the expert on Tevinter mages... No offense, Prickly. I’m sure it wasn’t like that.”

Oh no.

The dwarf shakes his head. “I thought I’d give you a heads up. Don't worry about the mage, I don't think you're his... type. But that won't stop Leliana from throwing you at him to see if you can get some information others couldn't. If you manage to get anything, great. She'll use you next time something like that comes up. If you don't — well. It's a pecking order sort of thing. You did lose a patrol. She might not kill you outright, but it doesn't mean she's forgotten.” Varric scrapes his chin again, a meditative gesture. “So, as I was saying. Complicated.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Angelica Archangelica , which in some traditions of European herbalism has been used to control fertility, and which may or may not have an equivalent species in Thedas, but either way might be something that Margo will need to look into at some point in the future.

Next up: back to Haven, comedy of errors

Hidden Costs

Chapter Summary

In which Margo returns to Haven, and Maile's bad decisions catch up with her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

To exist in the Fade is a paradox of thwarted expectations. When Margo opens her eyes — the ones afforded to her by the dreamworld — she expects some familiar vision: the field of summer grasses, perhaps, or the Escher sketch staircases, or some place in Haven. She is met with none of these. Even the cosmic shitgibbon is in absentia, a strange sense of *distance* confirming the creature's irrelevance to the space she now occupies. She is greeted with the textures of another's domain.

She finds herself in the kitchen of Baba's old village house – the clay stove in the corner, with its obligatory pot of baked milk; the rickety old table, one of its wobbly legs stabilized by a box of matches. The herbs – inula and fireweed and thyme — hang in fragrant bushels from the rafters. Beneath the tablecloth — gaudy with a riot of faded pink blooms, their plastic sheen worn to the underlying fabric — a miscellanea of letters, receipts, recipes, and gods only know what else Baba keeps stashed under it to "keep it safe."

Margo turns around, taking in the interior of the house, and trying to recall its original shape. What has the dream altered? The faces in the "red corner," where the icons would go if Baba weren't so performatively the village witch, stare at her with familiar watchful gazes. A strange assemblage of communist leaders and Christian saints, of benevolent and wrathful deities harnessed from different pantheons. Chubby little figures molded from salt dough crowd around small offerings of milk, sugar, and cigarettes. Above them, the photos of kin in fuzzy sepia — all conspicuously, unsurprisingly, women. The matriline. Roots of her roots.

In Baba's view of kinship, men are an incidental abstraction.

Margo finds herself sitting at the table, and she pulls the tea kettle towards herself, giving it an exploratory sniff. It's an earthy, scraping, abrupt scent – fireweed with something else, hypericum maybe, and a cold spice in the finish, like black currant leafs. Her attention is drawn to an old cup, chipped, with a pattern of orange chess pieces against the white porcelain. She pours herself some of the steaming, fragrant liquid.

"Ah, little thistle. Have you come for another visit?" Baba appears in the doorway to the bedroom, her hair wrapped in the usual kerchief. She wipes her hands on her apron. "I was just about to start on the gooseberry jam."

Margo stills. For a split second, she suspects subterfuge – Imshael taking on her grandmother's familiar shape. But, with another look at the old woman, she relaxes. No. She would know Baba even if she forgot herself. There is no replicating her.

"Not quite as fun as calling on the wolfling, hmm?" Baba chuckles. There's a kind of mocking disapproval to the old woman's expressions – and an intimately familiar one at that. "Trouble, that

one. Old Baba's got a nose for these things. *Na*, it is what it is. Good to stop by sometimes. You can't forget where you're rooted."

"Baba, what is this place? Why are you here? Are you..." Margo swallows. She doesn't know what to make of this gift that feels like a punch in the gut. She has a vivid recollection of scattering Baba's ashes under the aspen that grows at the top of the bend in the river, the bank speckled with the purple and yellow blooms of broomrapes. "Are you real?"

The old woman considers her, a smile on her thin lips. Even in old age, Baba has retained her infectious smile, the skin around her eyes creasing in a starburst of crowfeet. It used to feel like the face of her own future, and Margo mourns the loss of that intimate, irreplaceable similarity. The only parallel left is her new body's eyes, one shade paler, a less saturated gunmetal gray — and so unlike her former body's greenish hazel. It is a small thing, but in the dream logic it feels important that, even though everything else is different, she should have inherited something of Baba's eyes.

"As real as anything is around here." Baba picks up a tub of gooseberries from under the table, and settles on a stool across from Margo, a paring knife and a miniature spoon in hand, ready to seed her harvest before plopping the berries into the pot. "Have you forgotten the old songs, my thistle? I have taught you better than that."

Margo frowns at the dream's strange leaps in logic. But before she can ask Baba for clarification, the old woman begins to hum, and Margo stills. She knows the song. Baba used to sing it to her well into her early childhood — a strange, frightening little tale with a sweet, simple, repetitive melody. Baba never sang it to Jake — her brother got all the cheerful tunes. But not Margo. And, years later, she would sing it to her own daughter, for the time that had been allocated to them by whatever cosmic, ungenerous hand is in charge of such things.

"Baby, baby, rock-a-bye," Baba sings in her cracked, old woman's voice. "*On the edge you mustn't lie. Or the little grey wolf will come. And will nip you on the tum. Tug you off into the wood. Underneath the willow-root.*"

Margo shudders, suddenly really hearing the words. "Baba, why do you keep calling him 'wolfling'?" There. That seems like the relevant question. Doesn't Imshael refer to Solas as a wolf? Maybe she should have paid more attention to dream analysis instead of dismissing it as pseudoscientific hogwash when she still had the Internet at her fingertips — or, minimally, a library with a reliable catalogue.

Baba shrugs. Another eviscerated gooseberry plunks into a copper pot. "There are many names. I call you 'little thistle.' Or 'my heart.' Or 'my soul.' All are accurate. We are known by different things, none of them sufficient. Your mother called your *lélek* 'Margo.' Not a bad name, but not for a breath soul. Besides, the breath soul's gone now, so you don't need to worry about that." Another gooseberry joins the others in the pot. "But I name your *íz*. Only your *íz* matters, little thistle. That is where the roots grow. It's what makes us return."

Margo frowns, trying to piece together the scraps of memory. Baba had explained to her the concept of soul dualism when she was still very young — too young to really consider the problem of souls, let alone their multiplicity. She'd never questioned it before, perhaps because she'd never questioned Baba's own messy ethnic identity, somewhere between Slavic and Finno-Ugric and Roma, and staunchly uncommitted to a single frame, or even a single language. Baba, the compulsive code-switcher. But the belief in multiple souls, she remembers from when she was roped into teaching a history of religion course by her department — outside of her area of direct specialty, but what can you do? There are versions of this scattered throughout different shamanic traditions. Of course, there was no way to predict that any of this would eventually become

relevant — she should have paid more attention.

In retrospect, Baba's wild, indiscriminate syncretism — that tendency to gather plants, and myths, and gossip, and mix them all together — suddenly feels like a careful practice of dissimulation. Hard to say what's hidden in the mixtures.

“Why did she name me Margo?” she finally asks. It seems like as relevant a question as any. “Did she like daisies? Or was it a literary reference?”

The old woman shakes her head. Another gooseberry goes *kerplunk* into the copper pot. “Your mother took after her father, so she didn't understand about pearls anyway.” Baba sighs. “Sometimes it skips a generation, the knowing. It's a scattered sort of thing.”

Margo wants to ask Baba what she means, but the dream vacillates, a ripple disrupting its hidden armature.

“Before you go, my heart.” Baba fixes her with her graphite-gray eyes. “The girl. Not a child, but forced to be one. You will help, but ask nothing from the other one. Never ask for anything. Never for anything, and especially from those who are stronger than you. And should he offer, do not accept. Some trades are too dear.”

And then the dream shudders and fragments.

They set out from the hell bog earlier than expected, hoping to make the journey swiftly, and Margo is relieved that they do not linger. There is no time to catch up with Evie — a raven alights on Scout Harding's shoulder in the early morning, when the perennial drizzle isn't much more than a thick, ominous mist. Among other updates Margo is not privy to, the bird carries a message signed by Master Adan. The length of the procurement list makes Margo wonder whether the alchemist is trying to single-handedly open a new museum of natural history.

Evie and her entourage move on ahead without the rest of the scouting party. Before they leave, Margo gets a pointed look from Varric, a quick hug from the kid, who asks her to stop by for tea once they are all back to Haven, and a curt nod from Cassandra. Relaying Jan's final request put the Seeker in a rather sour mood. No one wants to be the bearer of that sort of news.

Margo catches Solas's gaze on her. “A moment of your time?” He casts a quick glance towards the others.

She approaches, still feeling thrown by the rapid switches between formality and intimacy. At this point, almost every sentence they exchange in public feels laden with double-meaning.

“I came across this book during our travels to the Avvar keep. The Herald thought that you might put it to good use.” The elf hands her an old, battered journal. The paper is water-warped, the writing smudged, but still readable. Margo leafs through the journal, careful not to damage the it further. Most of it sounds like completely demented ravings interspersed with esoteric tangents on demons, but from what she can gather, it also offers a detailed formula for a poison called “Tears of the Dead.” Apparently, even dead shit weeps, probably from too much aimless milling around in a horrid bog. And then, she realizes that the damn formula requires death root — also known as Brother Rufus's tentacled monstrosity that started this sordid mess — and Margo doesn't know whether to cackle maniacally or break into sobs.

Idiotic optimism being what it is, she opts for the former.

“Something amusing, lethallan?” A smile flickers in Solas's eyes, but he seems otherwise distracted.

“An excess of cosmic irony. But, thank you. This is perfect.”

“It was my pleasure.” Another almost smile, a small bow on the saucy side of formal, and the inescapable sense of double-entendre.

She watches the elf glide away to rejoin the others.

For reasons unknown, Blackwall chooses to stay behind with Margo's group. He picks a spot at the very back of their small procession, alongside Margo. For the first day, the conversation remains sparse and mostly monosyllabic, but Margo still gets the impression that the warrior has taken it upon himself to babysit her.

By mid-morning of the second day, a western wind shreds the oppressively low cloud cover, and the overall mood thaws into something approximating companionable chatter — though the bearded bear is missing his usual sardonic beats, his performative grumpiness ceding way to genuine discomfort.

By noon, Margo decides to take the bull by the horns. “All right. You’re making this awkward. Out with it.”

He clears his throat. “You know plants pretty well, then?”

Margo shrugs. Earth plants, sure. Here, she’s only scratched the surface. “I have some sense of the practical stuff, but I’m just starting on the Alchemy path. I don’t know half of what I should, and not a hundredth of what I would like.” She pauses. “What’s on your mind?”

“Do you know much about, ahem... flowers?”

Where the hell is this going? She pulls Auntie’s formulary out of its usual pocket. It somehow survived her sojourn with the Avvar — for whatever reason, her captors chose not to take the book from her. Perhaps they simply missed it. It is so worn from constant use that it practically blends into the coat lining. “I can look something up if you want. Any specific use you need? Poison? Healing? Something else?”

Something akin to a blush creeps over the skin not hidden by the spectacular beard. “Ornamental.”

He is actually quite endearing in his discomfort. Margo hides a smile. Blackwall strikes her as a decent sort. Whoever the lucky recipient of the flowers might be, they could do worse. “Ornamental I’m less familiar with, but let’s see if we can find you something aesthetically pleasing.” She leafs through the book, quickly scanning the pictures. She remembers seeing something that looked decorative. Some kind of lily? “How do you feel about crystal grace?” She hands him the book for examination.

He takes a long look at the page. “These are beautiful. Grow in the Hinterlands, as I recall. But...” His brow furrows with some unarticulated concern. “I wouldn’t...”

Margo frowns, trying to interpret his sudden unease — a faraway, stormy cast to his green-grey eyes. It occurs to her that their color is unlikely — by Earth standards, anyway. “Is there a symbolism to these that troubles you, Warden?” Might as well make the best of it, and find out if Theodosians attach meaning to their flowers.

Blackwall shrugs. "If there is, I'm not aware. They're medicinal, you said?"

Margo grins. "Beautiful *and* practical."

It earns her a chuckle, and the Warden's expression smoothes out. "Appropriate, then, I suppose."

He waits with quiet resignation, clearly expecting her to follow up with the logical inquiry. Margo glances at the warrior, amused. It's the first time since Jan's death and the Avvar mess that the smile doesn't feel like something dredged up by force from murky depths. "I'd add a sweetener to the water, and maybe a bit of vinegar, if the kitchen has it. Or even a few drops of a clear spirits. The bouquet will last longer that way."

Blackwall harrumphs. They walk in silence for a while. "You aren't going to pry?" he finally asks.

"Nope. But if you want to talk about it, you know where to find me."

A long pause. "I'll keep it in mind."

For the rest of the journey, the time Margo doesn't spend walking is occupied with stuffing burlap sacks full of plants.

They get to Haven by the early evening of the fifth day. She hauls the sacks of ingredients to the apothecary, with a little help from Blackwall, but Adan is nowhere to be found — as usual. She briefly considers going to bed early, but she decides against it. Her dreams feel like they require entirely too much intellectual effort, and she feels drained and unmoored, as if she's forgetting something that needed to get done.

Margo exits the apothecary with a vague hope for a hot dinner that does not involve armadillo-pig hybrids that taste faintly sulfurous. The courtyard is eerily empty, and there is no light coming from inside the nearby houses. She doesn't notice the shadow stalking along the wall until it is too late.

Before she can so much as blink, she finds herself flat on her back, in the snow, with an unfamiliar elf's knee crushing her throat. "Well. There you are." A redhead — striking in her own way, with delicate features spoiled by a habit of professional cruelty. Margo tries to wiggle from under the woman, and away from the knee crushing her windpipe, but the elf pulls a thin, stiletto-shaped dagger, and brings it right under Margo's left eye. Margo stills, attempting to conserve the little breath she has left. The world frays and fades at the edges, her ears simultaneously ringing with a high, whining keen, and full of cotton fuzz.

"I don't know how you've managed to convince the Nightingale that I somehow put you up to it, you ungrateful little shit, but don't think that I'm going to let this go, whatever your status with the Inquisition is." The voice, which to Margo sounds so far away it is at the edge of irrelevant — like a muted TV in another room — is oddly flat, almost expressionless, despite the harsh content. With what remains of her thinking capacity, Margo concludes that this must be the mythical Charter. "But I hear you've had a whole personality change since your little improvisation at the Breach. Made yourself indispensable, did you? Ingratiated yourself with the Herald. Clever, that." The elf drags the blade of her stiletto in a vertical line across Margo's cheek. The pain cuts through the fog of asphyxiation, but it too is distant, as if it's happening to someone else. As is the feeling of something warm trickling down her cheekbone, and into her ear.

"So. Seeing how I can't just put you down like the rabid bitch in heat that you are... As you seem

to think that fucking that Tevinter bastard was worth the lives of five of my people, you owe me five deaths. At my request, and to my specifications.” The elf brings her face close to Margo’s, and, in the absence of any peripheral vision to speak of, it is all that she can see. “Pay up, and I might consider the debt settled.” And then, the redhead hacks up in the back of her throat, and spits into Margo’s face.

And in the next instant, the elven agent is gone, faded into the night.

Margo stares into the night sky. The stars twinkle, alien and indifferent.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by the costs of body snatching. In the RAGT-verse, there are no free meatsack upgrades ;)

As always, thank you for your reading eyes, kudos, and comments <3 Ugh, RL is kicking my butt atm, so updates are slow. Thank you for your patience!

Fade to Black

Chapter Summary

In which Margo gets some much needed sleep.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Time stretches, marked by nothing but the howling of the wind. Eventually, lying supine in the snow in inarticulate terror becomes a profoundly unpleasant experience — the icy touch of melting snow is insinuating itself beneath her clothes. Margo sits up with a groan, rolls a loosely packed snow ball, and uses it to wipe off her face. The skin of her cheek smarts despite the numbness, and the snowball comes away a bloody mess.

She gets up, slowly, one foot, then the other, legs still wobbly from oxygen deprivation. Somewhere half-way nausea overtakes her, and she leans down, hands on her knees, trying to breathe through the spasms twisting her stomach. When the sick feeling recedes, Margo stares blankly at the snow at her feet with absolutely no idea what to do next. The entire experience seems distant, as if it is happening to someone else — a stranger, perhaps, or someone she knew once, long ago, but whose name and features blurred with time. Her body obeys her with a delay — as if she is piloting it by remote control, from a galaxy far, far away. But then, the damaged nerve endings in her cheek make themselves known, and she is promptly slammed back into the all-too-real here and now.

Margo hesitates. It seems that the most logical order of business would be to stop the blood dripping down the front of her coat — because leather is a bitch to clean, and while she supposes she could ask Solas to perform his nifty cleaning spell, she's pretty sure he's got better things to do with his magic than offer her late night dry-cleaning services. She makes her way back to the apothecary, stumbling only once on the way, which she files away as a win. An elfroot potion later, mercifully ready-made, and the skin on her cheek begins to tingle, but when she touches the cut her fingers come away stained red. She wipes the blood off on a rag and scans the vials for a generic poison antidote. She downs that too, just in case.

An elfroot salve and another health tonic later, and the blood is still trickling, slow and sluggish, but there. So the alchemical formulas have a limit to their efficacy.

She doesn't particularly want to think about trying to sew the wound shut. The thought of crude bone needles and catgut decides her, even if she still feels a little sheepish knocking on the elf's door, just on account of cosmetic concerns. Her body already has a truly impressive collection of scars, although none of them are on her face. What's one more? Besides, beneath the terror, the glimmer of understanding jostles with anger at the injustice of being punished for transgressions not of her own doing. *You took her body. Did you expect it to come for free?* Margo stifles a sigh. Her predecessor really did fuck this up spectacularly, and then Margo herself added to the mess with her clumsy attempts to survive Leliana. That Maile's particular brand of poison wasn't the one Margo herself would have picked doesn't mean that the outcome is entirely unexpected — certainly, she didn't sow what she's now reaping, but cause and effect, right? As Jake would have it, karma is a bitch.

Still. It is hard not to feel a sense of ownership — or at least some kind of custodianship — about the body you're squatting in after a while. Like it or not, this is the one she now has. The chances of another body hop are pretty slim in her estimation. Also, the blood's getting everywhere, and making a mess of things. And it hurts. So she trudges across the courtyard and knocks on the door of Solas's cabin. The windows are dark, but that might not mean anything. Considering how much time Solas must be spending in the Fade, she suspects that, if left to his own devices, he likely sleeps as much as her former cat.

Maybe cats are Fade walkers. That would certainly explain the sleeping patterns.

There is no answer, so she knocks again, but is only met with silence. She is about to turn around — although between the prospect of tracking down the Iron Lady and sporting a picturesque scar on her cheek, the latter seems vastly more appealing (after all, the Seeker rocks one of those just fine) — when the door opens.

Solas appears in the doorway, with the rumpled softness of sleep still about him. His left cheek bears the imprint of a pillow. His appearance takes Margo by surprise, and so they stare at each other for a few seconds with what is probably matching bewildered expressions. And then his gaze focuses, the sleepiness draining out of him, and he is back to his usual deceptively unassuming sharpness.

His eyebrows draw together at the sight of the bloody mess on her face. “Ma da’nas, what happened?”

She is too exhausted and ragged to give the switches in nicknames due consideration — she's starting to get a hang of his lexis, and this one she identifies as the private, but not overly intimate endearment. Possibly more than friends, less than other things. “Maile's bad taste in men is catching up with me,” she offers, gesturing to her cheek.

Solas's expression turns icy. “Who did this to you?”

Margo shakes her head — she has the distinct impression that he might be misinterpreting what she meant. “No, no. That wasn't... It was Charter.” At his deepening frown — clearly, his interpretation had taken him elsewhere — she shakes her head again. “She was in her right, in a way. Maile did betray her, however inadvertently. I just... it won't stop bleeding.”

Solas closes his fingers around her forearm, his touch gentle but firm as he guides her inside. He pushes the door shut behind them, and then he steps closer, his touch soft on her face. He peers at the cut. Margo turns her head to the side to offer him a better viewing angle. “I took an antidote already, but what do you think? Some special kind of poison? Or just a really deep cut?”

The elf's voice is grim. “I do not think this was caused by poison. An enchanted weapon, perhaps. A rune,” he adds at her blank stare.

Runes. Because what was really missing from her life are runes. Although... On a better day, this would make for an interesting proposition. Are runes actually powerful text or are they material, or alchemical in nature? “A rune as in some kind of sacred writing?”

“Is this what runes are in your world?”

Margo nods. “Something like that. Not here, I take it?”

“A mineral, usually infused with the essence of a slain spirit.”

Margo notes the hard edge in his voice. She steals a glance at him from the corner of her eyes —

her face still tilted as he examines the gash in her cheek — and the way his jaw is set suggests that he doesn't approve of the practice. "My world has a history of pretty appalling food chains as well, for what it's worth."

He passes his hand over her skin. There is a sensation of something burning itself out, and she grits her teeth, but then the jolt of pain is replaced by a fierce itching as the spell knits the skin together. Through all this, it dawns on Margo that the way his magic feels under her skin has become completely familiar, and she suddenly comes into awareness at just how many times over the last few weeks he's patched her up. Although she supposes that almost everyone at camp is pretty damn familiar with this particular sensation. Why do they have so few mage healers?

The nausea from her damaged throat is also gone, and she takes a deep experimental breath. The air goes in smoothly.

"There. It has stopped." He pauses. "The scar should fade in time."

His eyes are dark in the unsteady light of the fireplace, and he looks perturbed and abstractly aggrieved.

"Well, what's one more scar, right?" Margo shrugs matter-of-factly.

He gives her a puzzled look. "You do not think of this body as fully yours yet?"

Margo shrugs again. "It isn't my own, technically." She tries to formulate the strange, disarticulated relationship. "Most of the time, I no longer notice. As long as I don't spend time around reflective surfaces. Fortunately for me, they seem in short supply in Haven anyway. I have yet to see a mirror."

He hesitates, and then his hand comes to her cheek. He brushes away a stray lock of hair. "Perhaps... it is time you found one. It may help you domesticate your new appearance." Another short hesitation, but then he lifts his shoulder in a deceptively light shrug. "You are beautiful." His tone is placid — a neutral remark, like an observation about the weather. "There is a certain value in acknowledging that for yourself." He pauses, ruminating. "You overlook whatever weapons chance has put at your disposal at your own risk."

She meets his gaze. "Solas, I know you find Maile's appearance pleasing. But I have little to do with that. Or it with me. Nor was I trained to *weaponize* my physique. I am not, in fact, a bard, in case that weren't abundantly obvious."

"There is little about Maile I find pleasing, da'nas. But my point is elsewhere. In what way would your original body be a more accurate reflection of whatever you call 'I'? Is Cassandra defined by her cheekbones, and not her faith? Varric by his chest hair and not his wit? Blackwall by his beard, and not his loyalty? You are here now, and your body's previous occupant is no less dead for your scruples."

Margo tries to ignore the pang of unease at the implacable practicality of his pronouncement. She huffs a humorless chuckle. "Solas, Varric is defined by his chest hair. Scratch that. He defines himself by his chest hair. Have you seen his outfits? In fact, I think the chest hair is an inherent part of his wit."

His gaze on her softens, and he returns her half-smile. Margo's eyes travel to his lips. Had there truly been a time when she hadn't been sure whether he was handsome?

"The way you animate this body, or any other, is unique to you. You choose to inhabit it in a

certain way, and that is what I was referring to.”

Margo sighs, and then she shakes her head and chuckles. Did the elf just summarize Bourdieu’s concept of habitus while turning it into a compliment? Come to think of it, it would have been so much easier to explain to her undergrads if they’d had the concept of the Fade. Maybe they can get to Foucault next, and then take a tour of continental philosophy.

She squashes the mental babbling. In either case, she understands his point perfectly well. She only has to think about the way Imshael wears his doppelgänger disguise to get a very clear illustration. And suddenly she no longer feels quite so disembodied, and, despite this, the prospect of the scar does not phase her either. And to add insult to injury, she suddenly really wants to find a mirror.

Ugh. From French philosophy to vanity, in one fell swoop. The damn elf will be the death of her.

“Have I mentioned that you are a shameless flirt?”

His eyes crinkle in amusement, but he purses his lips, mock-serious. “So you keep telling me, but I am simply stating what is the case. Besides, why shameless? If it is something we both enjoy, what would obligate us to embarrassment?”

Margo cocks her head, suddenly indecisive. The ball is in her court again, but her eyes keep returning to his lips, as if drawn there by some irrevocable gravitational force. She forces herself to meet his gaze. Naturally, he has noticed. He does a rather shoddy job of hiding the slight smugness. “Distracted?” His voice is quiet, barely above a whisper, and there’s something about the quality of that soft, intimate tone that sends a jolt of acute vertigo through her. It feels like falling, and for a few long seconds she can’t shake it to save her life. And then she realizes, with an emotion awfully close to terror, that as far as her existence in this world is concerned, the elf is at once the hurricane, and the eye of the storm. Poison and remedy.

Another untenable ontological contradiction.

Well, then. Playing coy with herself at this stage seems just plain silly. This has long since evolved beyond the inoffensive crush phase, so no point in pussyfooting about it.

But this too shall pass, right? Oh dear Unspecified Creator Deity, please let the Persians be right about that. Of all the things, *this*, whatever it is, is not something she can afford. Not at present anyway.

Margo regroups. “If you must fish for a compliment, then yes. Distracted. But...” She raises a finger, and waves it in the air for good measure in the universal sign of ‘I am about to make an important point here.’ “There is an imbalance in our relationship. I am always the one coming to you for help, and I have a feeling I’m accruing a massive karmic debt. So, first, I hope you don’t charge interest. And, second, is there something I can do to repay you? To balance the scales a little?”

Solas frowns in puzzlement. “A karmic debt? This is a concept from your world?”

Ah. Right. Wrong colloquialism again. How does she explain the notion of karma? Margo tries to think through a formulation that would port well. She catches him observing her through the process, the trace of a smile on his lips, as if he’s enjoying the view. Well. Nothing wrong with a man who enjoys the sight of you thinking.

“Your world may have something similar. It actually just means action and refers to the relationship of cause and effect, though I’m simplifying. What I’m trying to say is that I am

constantly the recipient of your help — and I'm afraid I have little to offer in return. I suppose I can supply you with various alchemical remedies, but considering the main ones mages use are lyrium potion, and considering the stuff is addictive and quite likely bad for you, that's hardly a good way to settle the debt."

Solas seems to weigh her explanation. "Not all my actions were beneficial to you, ma da'nas, even when they were intended as such. Not to mention that you have also saved my life on multiple occasions. As to 'settling debts,' I do not like the finality of the phrase. Is not the goal of such a settlement to terminate a relation one finds burdensome?"

Margo chuckles despite herself. Clever man. "Let me rephrase then. Is there anything you want? Or need?"

She expects a cheeky flirt in response, so when his expression turns deadly serious — and a little forlorn — Margo isn't quite ready for it. "Your wish," he says, finally.

Margo frowns, puzzled.

"I would enjoy learning more about your world. Or any other topic of your choosing. I have... many questions. Perhaps even over wine, as in the image you had crafted from the Fade."

Ah. The hypothetical memory bubble she sent him from the Avvar prison. She is vaguely surprised he still remembers — in the mad scramble of her escape and the battle that followed, she had almost forgotten their Fade conversation herself. She's so thrown by this request, however, that she blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. "Do you in fact drink? Wine I mean?"

Solas shrugs. "On occasion. I did more frequently in the past. Many lifetimes ago, it seems."

Margo narrows her eyes, suddenly suspicious. Does he mean his younger years, or does he literally mean a different lifetime? She wouldn't put it entirely past him to remember his former reincarnations, if such things exist.

"You may bring the wine, and we will consider part of the debt, if there is one, repaid." Another small, very private smile.

Margo rubs her face with both hands, as much out of exhaustion as to distract herself from the now apparently permanent impulse to kiss him. Right. Adding wine into this mix may be not the most idiotic idea she's ever had, but it's definitely got its eye on the hall of fame.

Let's pour this here canister of kerosene on yonder garbage fire. What could possibly go wrong?

Instead of all that, she tells him about Charter's debt repayment plan. Solas stays silent for a long time. She avoids looking at him — because she doesn't particularly want to find an expression of pity on his features, even though she has a strong suspicion that this is precisely what she would encounter if she checked. But he surprises her. When she eventually steals a glance, it isn't pity. It is pure, white-hot anger mixed with disgust, and overlaid with that now familiar resignation. But then the resignation wins over — that deeply rooted fatalism again.

Whatever it is about the emotion, it propels him to act. He steps closer, puts his arms around her, and pulls her in. She returns the embrace, snaking her arms around his waist. He plants a soft kiss on her forehead. "One day at a time," he says quietly. "I, for one, am not convinced that any of us will survive past the closing of the Breach, considering the Herald's unique properties, so the prospect of you being turned into an assassin against your will might never come to pass."

What sort of fucked up mess is she in that this is, in fact, reassuring? "Ever the optimist," she

chuckles, and looks up. His eyes in the soft glow flash with an odd amethyst gleam. He tightens his arms around her. “It has been a long time since I have been accused of optimism.”

She leans her forehead against his chest, and closes her eyes. “Well, you're in luck. Apparently, I have it in excess — idiotic optimism, that is. If you'd like some, I'm happy to share.”

She feels the quiet chortle reverberate through her. “I will keep the offer in mind.”

They stay silent for a time.

“You are exhausted. How is your dreaming?”

She glances up at him again. “Rather more active than I'd like, honestly.”

He nods. “Any more visitations from Imshael?” There is a banked tension in his voice.

Should she tell him about the bathhouse dream? It just feels so wrong, somehow, and she still can't shake the feeling that maybe she is the one bringing it on herself.

“Imshael is... around. But it's not just him. I have some other very vivid dreams — the problem is more one of control than anything else, I suspect.”

He seems to reflect on this, then nods. “You have a facility with entering the Fade. Of what I have seen of your dreams, they are... very visceral. You do not touch the Fade lightly. I suspect this is because it is the more natural state for you, though why, I am unsure. Perhaps that is a feature of your people or your world more generally. But you do not know how to control it, nor are you, in fact, a mage in any conventional sense of the term. My ability to help you — or train you — would be hindered by my own magic.” He pauses, seemingly vacillating on the edge of a decision. “But I could control the dreaming for you, and allow you to regain some of your strength. Or at least, some equilibrium.”

Margo looks at him in mild puzzlement. “You're offering to stabilize my dreams for me?” She's seen him do this before, so it seems like the logical conclusion.

He shakes his head. “No. I am offering you Fadeless sleep, at least for a moment. If you wish to lay your head somewhere and rest without dreaming, my bed is at your disposal. At close proximity, I can buffer you from the Fade for a time.”

Margo's eyes widen. “You would do this?”

“I cannot — and would not — sever you from the Fade.” His face twists in distaste. “And you must learn to control this ability of yours sooner rather than later. But...”

“Please. Fadeless sleep would be fantastic.” She beams at him.

“Provided you do not mind sharing my bed.” There is a twinkle of humor in his eyes.

Margo gives him a mockingly disapproving squint. “I suppose there's been a precedent, so what's another time? Or are you fishing for another compliment?”

“I am offering to help.” Now he's just looking cheeky. “But should you feel the need to offer a compliment in return, I am all ears.”

Margo shakes her head, and then she just laughs. “You know what my grandmother would have said about you? That you're a very special kind of bad news.”

Solas's eyebrows draw together, but his smile warms his face. Margo decides she finds the expression rather fetching. "Ah, a backhanded compliment, then. I suppose it will have to do."

The next five minutes are spent restocking the fireplace. She hangs her coat on the back of the chair — again. At this point, this is becoming a habit. She kicks off her boots. And then she occupies the spot by the wall. Solas sits next to her.

"I have to be awake to do this," he explains, a slight note of tension in his voice.

Margo is about to say something, but then a jaw-splitting yawn overtakes her. "Wake me up when you get tired? I just need a couple of hours of deep sleep."

He nods, pulling the thin blanket over her.

"I am profoundly in your debt," she mumbles.

She thinks he says something in Elvhen, but she's too tired to parse it. In the next moment, she's out like a light, and there are, blissfully, no dreams.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, which Solas has managed to turn into yet another flirt.

Next up: Evie's past comes to light (a little bit, anyway)

Apologies for the slow updates, folks! Thank you for reading and for your kudos and follows and comments, as always. They are a joy to me. Life Stuff (TM) is grimly overwhelming at the moment, so I am writing updates to this story when I can/have the energy, which, atm, isn't very often. I've not abandoned the project — thank you for your patience.

None Now Remember

Chapter Summary

In which some of Evie's past comes to light, while muddying the waters further

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Margo opens her eyes to the sight of a bald, shriveled little man staring at her in doleful disapproval from the opposite wall. The villainous looking fellow memorialized in the painting puts her in mind of an abbot or some other morally uptight religious figure — it is entirely beyond her why anyone would consider his mug to be a suitable form of decoration. How Solas manages to fall asleep with that thing presiding over the surroundings is anybody's guess. She'd at least put a sheet over it.

Come to think of it, who might have lived in this house before the elf requisitioned it? Unless, of course he was assigned to it by the powers that be?

A shaft of sunlight slanting through the window lets Margo know in no uncertain terms that she overslept, but at least she feels rested. She cannot for the life of her remember the last time she woke up after daybreak.

She sits up and looks around. The hut is empty, its usual occupant nowhere in sight. The mattress — straw and horsehair, or something like it, she guesses — is dimpled at the edge, as if someone had sat there while she slept. Under her hand, the coarse linen bedding retains a trace of warmth. So Solas had stayed beside her, departing only recently.

She gets up, shrugs on her jacket, and pulls on her boots.

The sneaky, theatrically spy-like maneuver she undertakes next — a furtive peeking out of the side of the window to check whether the courtyard is empty — makes her feel utterly ridiculous.

It does lend useful, if not particularly heartening information. Master Adan is discussing something with a male elf right at the threshold of the apothecary. Another bloke — large, lumpy, and ruddy from cold and exertion — is chopping firewood with an expression of bored despair. And then there's another character she has never seen before — a dark-skinned fellow with a fussy undercut and rather artfully arranged black curls. He is wearing a partially plated, very flashy piece of ornamental armor that looks distinctly ill-suited for the weather — though that, in itself, is nothing new. The only person she has so far encountered who dresses sanely and with a clear understanding of the local climate is Amund.

The fussy fellow is arguing with a Chantry sister, and neither looks particularly pleased.

Margo turns on her heels and marches to the back of the house. She eyes the narrow window dubiously. The last thing she needs is a reenactment of Winnie the Pooh. Well. As long as you can get your head and shoulders through it, the rest will follow, right? She throws the window open, takes a quick peek to check whether she has an audience, and, reassured that she does not, she exits that way.

She lands in the snow and recoils immediately with a muffled curse. To be fair, her opposite number — one of the rabbitty piglets locally called “nugs” — clearly did not expect such outrageous behavior from the two-legged denizens either. It squeals, skids in place for the first few seconds of its initiated flight response, and then it takes off down the hill in the direction of the forge.

If Varric could see her now, Margo is pretty sure he would be howling with laughter.

Right. It has been at least fifteen years since she snuck out of a guy’s house through the window. A special kind of bad news indeed.

Margo hesitates, trying to determine which direction will least likely lead to detection. She decides to follow the nug. If someone asks, she can always claim that she is on a mission to collect the creature’s droppings. Master Adan does use nug dropping ash for something or other. Come to think of it, this is an interesting question — she will have to check what nug droppings might be used for. A source of nitrates?

By the time she levels with the tavern, Margo drops the sneaky act. So far no one has paid her any particular attention. The most reasonable thing to do would be to follow protocol, and report back to Torquemada — for whatever unpleasantness the spymaster has concocted for her this time — but the prospect of doing so on an empty stomach does nothing for her mood. Tavern it is.

“Hey, Margo!” The moment she steps over the threshold, she is accosted by the Qunari. Bull is presiding over a table of very efficient looking mercs. “Come along now. Grab a seat. Met the Chargers yet?”

Introductions follow.

Krem, she decides she likes right away. The others look a lot more closed in on themselves, and focused on each other — a tight-knit group with little use for outsiders.

Bull claps her on the back. “Heard you all came back last night from the Mire. Missed you at training this morning. You’re usually the first up and on the grounds. Slept in?”

The question feels unmistakably loaded. “Sorry, Bull. Yeah. Tangling with Avvar and dead shits will do that to you.”

That seems to satisfy him. “Hear there were demons.”

She wonders what he’d make of Imshael. “Not for my group.”

Krem gestures at her in question, and then he passes a plate of food and some kind of muddy brown concoction that smells of hay and quite possibly earthworms. Margo supposes it is probably meant to symbolize tea. She gives him a grateful nod despite the questionable drink, and she digs into the root vegetables and lard mush. Flissa’s communal grub is nothing if not spartan, but Margo decides that she’s not going to be picky about it. At least, it’s free. From what she can tell, the system is simple. Basic necessities are provided by the Inquisition. Everything above that — and this includes both bathing and alcohol — is out of pocket expenses. Adan doesn’t seem to be selling his wares, though it’s entirely possible that he has some kind of arrangement with Sedgwick. And perhaps the overall economic arrangement is different for the local nobles — and, she would guess, even more different for the underclasses, such as for those elves who are not explicitly members of the armed forces.

“What did I miss?” she asks Bull between two mouthfuls of tasteless, fibrous, slimy starch.

“Met the Vint yet?”

Margo shakes her head. “Not that I know of. What does he look like?”

The Qunari shrugs. “Like your typical Vint. Fancy. Full of himself. Mage.” He spits out the last word like something that got stuck between his teeth. But then, Bull’s expression turns shrewd and calculating. “Then again, I hear some people like that sort of thing.”

Margo waits until she’s finished chewing her mouthful of mystery root vegetable. Then she takes a sip of “tea.” Gah. It tastes exactly like it smells. “No doubt some people do,” she offers with a bland smile. Two can play this game. “No accounting for taste.”

The Iron Bull chuckles, the sound reminding her of some kind of large, metal gong. “Ever tried a Qunari before?”

Margo chokes on her drink. “Wh-... Tried *what* now?”

A couple of mercs snigger. Krem shakes his head in indulgent disapproval. “Stop giving her shit, chief — she’s just back from the field. Give her a second to acclimate.” He turns to Margo, his expression amused. “Don’t worry about it. You’re too blonde for him anyway. He likes ‘em redheads.”

Margo narrows her eyes, and takes a quick glance at the Iron Bull. What is he trying to achieve here? Sure, his expression is teasing — just your regular bawdy banter of the typical mixed-gender army variety. But the eyes — well, eye, to be exact — remains calm, and eerily perceptive. Like what she imagines the eyes of a Stasi officer might have looked like. In fact, the apparent come-on doesn’t really feel like one. More like a chess game. *Knight to queen’s bishop 3* .

Ugh. She sucks at chess.

Margo buys herself time by swallowing more tea, and asking for a refill — to Krem’s approving nod. Oh Dear Unspecified Deity, does this nice young merc actually *like* this liquid horror?

“Just curious, Krem. Blondie here has never come across a Qunari before. But she came... across a Vint, from what I hear. Makes one wonder — been ‘in touch’ with the Vints, but not with the Qunari. How come?”

More sniggers, though a bit forced by the sound of them.

Oh, she’s so not in the mood for this. Especially because she has the distinct impression that the Ben Hassrath is actually having two conversations at once. One for the benefit of his companions — though if they know him as well as she thinks they do, no one’s fooled. So, on the surface, it’s predictably lewd jokes about Maile’s sexual escapades and rather lazy propositioning. And then there’s the content in the background. The implicit subtext being something like *I’m not buying what you’re selling, so you better come up with something more convincing*.

Margo forces her facial muscles to smooth out before the frown settles, though her jaw still tightens in irritation. She thought they were... well, not friends, exactly. Still. Why is he suddenly doing this? She can’t shake the feeling that there are always two parallel agendas that get folded into each other where the Qunari is concerned. Except, of course, this is not the first time this has come up. Sera’s truth or dare game was the first occasion.

Wait a second. Torquemada assumed she was spying for the Qunari. Is Bull assuming that she is spying for Tevinter?

All right. He wants double-speak? She can do double-speak. Except, she has the distinct impression that her only shot at getting out of this is to confuse expectations — or, at least, to sidestep the question. Or to redirect. Hmm. Maybe she can turn this around, and kill two birds with one stone.

Margo leans back in her chair and gives the Qunari an appraising once-over, letting her body language morph into an imitation of a kind of devil-may-care sauciness. “What’s the question, Bull?”

His good eye narrows slightly. “Oh, I’m just curious. Familiar enough with Vints, but never seen a Qunari, so... I’m wondering if you might be from Tevinter, Blondie.” There is an odd weight to the question.

“Never set foot there,” Margo responds in perfect honesty.

The Qunari’s expression remains inscrutable, but he leans back, mirroring her casual pose. “Then how come?”

“A streak of bad luck, perhaps?” she offers, and gives the Ben Hassrath a look that she hopes matches his own. The one where there seems to be a surface meaning for the general audience — and an underlying, targeted question.

It’s subtle. In fact, so subtle that if she weren’t looking for it like her life depends on it — which it quite possibly does — she might have missed it. But there’s just a tiny fraction of a movement to the Qunari’s good eye — a tension, there then gone. It’s followed by an almost imperceptible nod. And then his mouth stretches in a good-natured leer. “Well, my door’s always open, Blondie. If you ever feel like sampling the other side.”

There are more chuckles from the peanut gallery, and a couple of the Chargers give her appraising looks. Krem’s expression remains closed and thoughtful, but he offers her more tea, which she accepts. The conversation drifts to more neutral territories, and Margo tries to finish her grub without looking like she’s in a hurry. The taste no longer registers. Once her bowl is empty, she stands up, offers the assembled company a mock military salute, and makes for the exit.

“See you on the training grounds this afternoon, Blondie.”

Disregard the chuckles, and the message sounds a lot like *this conversation is far from over*.

Margo walks to the forge next, hoping to get a replacement for her lost daggers — they never surfaced after the Avvar debacle. Master Harritt hands her a generic set — she’s not, by any stretch of the imagination, a weapons expert, but they seem like perfectly adequate tools for slicing something to shreds. The smith surveys her critically. “You want something fancier, I can work with you, but it’ll take time, materials, and some money. Then again, considering you have a tendency to lose your weapons...” He trails off, a disapproving scowl on his features. Margo nods, vaguely apologetic.

“Well. Take care of them this time.” Master Harritt walks away, leaving her planted in the snow.

Maybe she really should start thinking about acclimating. For real, this time. To the body. To the weapons. And to her new role, whatever the hell it is. It doesn’t seem like she’s going back to her world any time soon. Or ever. What did Baba say? The breath soul is gone, anyway, so no need to worry about that. The breath soul, of course, being the one that is attached to her body, the enfleshed essence of it. And if that’s gone, then...

The thought sucks the breath out of her, and she stands there, looking blankly at the men working the forge. She's not going to see her brother again and hear about his derailed romances. Or listen to him play Bob Dylan on his old, seven-string guitar. She won't get woken up by the damn cat at 4am because that's when it decides to come in for a cuddle. She won't buy an expensive plane ticket to fly back home to tidy up her daughter's grave. Or get badgered by Uncle Janos and Aunt Ljubica about when she's planning to finally settle down, get married, and have more kids — no sense in lingering on the past, after all, what's done is done. Or lie down under the aspen where Baba's ashes are scattered, staring at the clouds drifting against the blue. Or talk and laugh with her old grad school friends, sometimes over late night Skype sessions and too much wine because life has scattered them to the winds, and this is how they meet now. She won't sit through a faculty meeting with her colleagues. She won't write that article, or finish that book manuscript. She won't teach a class ever again. She won't go on another movie date with the Bulgarian anarchist from the physics department, or discuss Bertolucci cinematography over late night wine and maybe a cigarette sheepishly pilfered from the people over at the next table. Or, even more sheepishly, move on to Game of Thrones, which is what they really want to talk about anyway. Or reminisce about what it was like to grow up in the ashes of crumbled socialist projects. Or to relocate to the "West" and start over. She won't have coffee at her favorite café, and read a trashy fantasy novel on a Saturday morning, shirking work in favor of a semblance of rest. There is no coffee. She's not even sure whether there are Saturdays.

Well, at least there might be trashy lit, considering Varric's writing...

Margo forces herself to focus. There is no helping this. The world is all that is the case. And within that world, there is the giant hellmouth in the sky, and Evie, and however the two problems might be connected.

The movement is hesitant at first — one foot, then the other — but at length, Margo finds herself walking.

She knocks on Evie's door, expecting no answer. Surely, the Herald of Andraste is not hiding in her hut while the rest of the camp is in full mid-morning swing, avoiding all sorts of unpleasant responsibilities that come with being the Local Deity Head Honcho's Officially Selected One.

As it turns out, it is exactly what Evie is doing. "Margo! You came! I'm so glad you're here!"

The girl gives Margo a tight hug, shuffling her from side to side in an awkward little dance.

Margo returns the embrace, and then she steps back to take a better look at the kid. She is wearing a bizarrely mismatched outfit that involves leather leggings, a very loose, baggy and rather hirsute sweater, an impossibly bright blue kaftan three sizes too big, and the kind of slippers with upturned toes that Margo associates with something vaguely and undecidedly "Oriental." A strange alternative to the too revealing, unpractical battle armor.

They step into the hut, and Evie immediately sets off to fuss with a tea kettle on a little stove in the corner of the wooden house.

"You'll have tea, right? I have very nice tea. Not the stuff that Flissa makes. That... I don't think that's tea at all. They boil this thing — grubs? No, not grubs. Worms? They're dry and powdery and I never would've thought they used to be wriggly, but Varric showed one to me, before... well, before it's baked, I guess. Except that he says they're not actually alive, not in the proper sense, but that was just very confusing, because does that mean they're *undead* worms? Like those poor people in the Mire?"

Margo smiles, trying to repress the urge to upchuck whatever it is Krem had her drink. “Nice tea sounds really good.”

Evie turns to her with a kind of hopeful, beseeching expression. Margo observes the girl. She really is very pretty. In this light at least, Margo notices the things that she hadn’t paid attention to before. Like the way that Evie’s bob cut accentuates her delicate, almost childish features. The big, dark blue eyes — one shade away from violet under long, thick lashes. The slight plumpness of her cheeks, and the perfect, porcelain-doll complexion. The dusting of freckles across her nose. On the surface, everything about Evie is almost unbearably cute. But there are the other things there, more subtle. Like the worried crease that is morphing into a permanent wrinkle between her brows.

And the ghost of a scar — in the shape of stylized sun — on her forehead.

It’s faint. So faint, in fact, that Margo would have never noticed it, but for the combination of the fact that Evie’s bangs are held back from her face with a narrow strip of purple fabric, of the slight sheen of perspiration because the cabin is inordinately warm. The slanted light of the unusually bright Haven morning catches the faint imprint in the middle of Evie’s forehead, like a silver ghost. Or a watermark, visible only at certain angles.

Evie notices Margo’s inquiring gaze, blushes, and turns around.

“Sorry.” A quiet and miserable utterance. “I’m not wearing face powder. It’s just that I thought, I’d take the day to myself, and then I got distracted, and then...”

Margo walks over to the kid, and puts her arm around the girl’s shoulder. Elves, by and large, are shorter, but she’s actually slightly taller than Evie. “Don’t you fuss over that on my behalf. Also, you know you’re gorgeous, right? You need not worry about that for one bit. It’s not noticeable, especially with how you wear your hair.”

Evie rubs her forehead. “You did, though. Notice, I mean.” Her tone is forlorn. “Bann Trevelyan always says that I need to cover it, just in case. And I have this really nice powder from Val Royaux, but it makes me break out in little red dots which only draw more attention to... well. So I thought... Because I wasn’t going to go out until later...”

Margo takes over the tea preparation. There is a slight tremor to Evie’s hands.

“Tell me about it?” She doesn’t want to pry. Except, of course, she has to pry. And she doesn’t know why the scar is important — except it feels like it is. Why would Trevelyan senior fret over her daughter’s makeup? Wouldn’t that be the women’s job?

Evie sniffs, still abjectly miserable over the whole thing. “I don’t know. That’s the thing. Bann Trevelyan never explained how I got it, exactly. I didn’t *always* have it, I don’t think, but... It was... It was right around the time my mom went away, but then Bann Trevelyan never talked about my mom. Didn’t much like when I asked him about her, either. And Aunt Lucille would always say something about letting the dead rest in peace — though I don’t know if all dead rest in peace, exactly, because in the Mire, they’re certainly very active, and not very peaceful at all.” She takes a deep breath. “So, actually, I think Aunt Lucille is wrong about that. Not that she’d ever admit it if I ever pointed that out! Always with the *don’t you slouch, young lady* and *who will want to marry such a clumsy fool* and *young women should be seen, not heard* and *when you’re my age, Maker preserve us...*” Evie’s face turns resolute, and she continues in a stage whisper, “Asshat. Just a little bit.”

Margo nods in approval. “From what I’ve heard about Aunt Lucille, I’d say that this is an accurate assessment.”

Evie offers a tentative smile and starts picking at one of the buttons of her absurd kaftan. “Right? I mean, she did call me an abomination once.”

Margo frowns. As far as unflattering monikers go, that one seems rather harsh by local standard — even for an unpleasant old bat. If someone called her an abomination, she might just mix some strong laxatives into their tea. “Why did she call you that?”

That propels Evie towards new levels of bleakness — clearly reflected on her face — and Margo feels terribly sorry she asked. “I don’t know. It’s not like I’m a mage. I can’t do magic, or anything like that. Only mages can be abominable, right? Is that the word? Or is it abominated? I mean, abomination is what happens when mages get possessed by a demon. But those corpses in the Mire were possessed by demons, Solas said, so doesn’t that mean that they’re abominations too? Or is it that if you don’t have magic, you can’t be one, and they have to call you something else?”

Margo shrugs noncommittally. Yikes. Mages can be overtaken by demons? Ok. All right, she can work from this. What does this mean? Epistemologically speaking, what are the implications of that process? She forces herself to think. Spirits and demons are kissing cousins, from what she understands. Mages... Mages have some kind of specialized access to the Fade. The Fade harbors spirits. And demons. Who want something. See: Imshael. Solas had mentioned to her that she is not a mage in the conventional sense of the term, meaning that having control over the dreaming process is not enough to make one a mage. But Solas... there is something important about the elf. Something she almost grasped during their memory return ritual. Something about spirits, and bodies, and...

Oh, bloody hell. All she can remember is the kiss. And how his lips felt on hers. The first time. And then the subsequent times. And then, tongue. Oh, suspiciously absent creator deities, a whole lot of tongue. Very expertly used. And hands. And the way they always feel cool against her skin. And how...

Not helpful. Not helpful *one* little bit. *Focus, you fool*. Where is that stern talking-to from the apocryphal Aunt Lucille when you need one?

All right. Mages, demons, abominations... she needs more time. And a research library. And a reliable informant who doesn’t kiss her every time she’s onto something.

“Right,” Margo finally says. “So...” She can do this. Just... don’t think about the pink elephant. Or elves. “How *did* you come about the scar? Do you remember anything about it?”

Evie hesitates, and Margo has a sudden bout of inspiration. “Because if you’re self-conscious about scars, I can show you mine, and I promise you that yours will pale in comparison. No pun intended.”

Evie gives her a hopeful look. “Really? Oh...” The kid brightens up before getting flustered again. “I don’t mean it like that. I don’t want you to have scars. Scars are bad, right? Bann Trevelyan says that scars mar a woman’s beauty, and make one’s prospects for finding a suitable husband less likely. Though I think what he actually said was something like ‘depreciating value’ and ‘matrimonial market’ and ‘protecting one’s assets,’ though I think he might be confused about how it all works — it’s not like there’s a market out there, with little stalls and shops, and you just go and browse the wares until you find something you like. Right?”

Margo stifles a snort. Bann Trevelyan could use some laxatives in his tea. And be forced to shit outside, in the snow somewhere. “That’s... quite the picture. No, I’m pretty sure that’s not *quite* the way it works.”

“Oh. Oh, good. Because I’m very bad at bargaining. Anyway... oh! Scars!”

Margo lifts her linen shirt and shows off her abdominal incision. “Tadaa!”

Evie’s eyes widen in surprise. “Oh! That’s...”

Margo nods. “A pretty impressive scar, right?”

Evie’s face screws up in a mixture of concern and wonder. “That’s.. You survived a rage demon? ”

Margo nods again and offers Evie her cheekiest smile. “Exactly my point. Scars are just reminders that you survived what life threw at you. I got more, too. See? Pretty forehead scar that’s barely there and that looks like it’s a design isn’t the end of the world.”

Evie sighs. “You think it’s pretty? I mean, it doesn’t look horrific? I just wish... I don’t want to look horrific.”

“You are the least horrific person I know, kiddo. Don’t fret.”

Judging by the quiet gurgling in the corner, the kettle is ready. Margo pours two cups of tea after finding some mismatched clay cups in one of the cabinets. They settle across from each other on two rustic chairs.

She sips, inhaling the steam with bone-deep pleasure. As promised, the tea is fantastic. A hearty, sweet oolong, if she were to follow her taste buds.

“Tell me more about it. Not just about the scar. What was it like to grow up in Bann Trevelyan’s household?”

Evie sighs, blows on her tea, and takes a sip. “I’m not the best example, really. Not like my siblings. I was sick a lot.” Her eyes take on a faraway expression. “Almost all the time, really. Not with the same thing, or anything like that, but... lots of bed rest. As far back as I can remember.”

Margo frowns. Sick? What kind of sick? Could this explain her poor combat skills. “Is this why you’re having trouble with combat? Was your illness in the way of training?”

Evie shrugs. “I guess. Bann Trevelyan said it was important I train, but he never seemed to think it was important that I train just *now* . There were lots of ‘we’ll start next week,’ or ‘let’s wait until Harvestmere,’ or... and I’d get... really tired. Well, not always. Not while... Mom. But then mom was gone... and... Anyway, I guess he just kept waiting for me to get better. Or stronger? Or just less... *me*. ”

Oh you poor kid. “What happened to your mom, if I may ask?”

Evie frowns into her teacup. “I don’t know. No one wanted to talk about it to me. Except... She wasn’t really gone. Not *exactly* . Not forever, anyway. She would come by in the evening, when everyone else had gone to bed. And she’d sing to me.”

Margo frowns. Did the mother die? Or did she leave, and sneak back in to see her daughter? “You mean... when you would dream? She would visit you in dreams?”

Evie shakes her head, and takes another sip of tea. “No. Yes. I mean, yes, sometimes. But it didn’t feel like dreaming. She was right there, like you are right there. And then...”

Margo gives her an encouraging nod.

“I don’t remember. It’s all jumbled up in there, like an attic someone just keeps throwing things into thinking ‘oh, we’ll get to it during spring cleaning,’ but... it’s always winter? Anyway, it was the year I got *really* sick. Bann Trevelyan kept giving me medicines, more and more of them, but they sure didn’t seem to help. He said... ‘just gotta ride it out.’ But then he invited people to treat me. Except, I think...” Evie huddles around her cup as if chilled, even though the hut is sweltering hot. “I don’t think that worked either.”

Margo tries to piece together the disjointed narrative. Evie’s mom dies — or leaves. Evie herself doesn’t seem certain. Except Evie keeps seeing her mother’s — what? Ghost? Or her actual mother who is sneaking around? And she is ill — though it could also be the psychological effects of losing her mother, whichever way that happened. And Bann Trevelyan decides to medicate at home, but failing that, he summons ... what, exactly? A medical commission? Ritual experts? “Is that when you got the scar?”

Evie nods, not looking up. “I guess so. I didn’t have it before, but then I had it... after.”

“So what happened after that?”

Evie stares at her strange slippers. “Not much changed, to be honest. I was still sick. Mom would still come. And then the others started too, sometimes, but I didn’t tell anyone about the others. Or about mom, either, because I didn’t think that’d go over well. Except that Aunt Lucille found out, eventually. Because of the dog. A Mabari. They’re really smart, you know? Had her since she was a pup. And I guess I really missed her. And me and the others, we were just playing anyway. And then she said — Aunt Lucille, not the dog — that I couldn’t stay at home, and that I should go away where they could train me, but Bann Trevelyan said that was out of the question, and that we had to wait. Because Etienne and Moira were still trying for a baby, and until they couldn’t have one for sure, no decisions could be made. They even had gone on the Summer Pilgrimage to ask Andraste to give them a son. Though, honestly, I really don’t think Andraste’s in the business of giving out babies.”

Margo chuckles. She can’t follow much of this, so she tries to remember the statement verbatim. What on earth is the connection between sending Evie away and babies? And what ‘others’? And what does the dog have to do with any of this? “Etienne and Moira, these are your...?”

“My older brother and his wife. Bann Trevelyan wasn’t too pleased about that either. When it was clear that they couldn’t... you know.” Evie draws a breath. “Maxwell’s in the middle, but Maxwell made it real clear that he wouldn’t wed, ever. And my sister... I don’t think I’ve ever even met her, she was out of the house by the time I was born.”

Margo frowns in utter consternation. The only thing she caught was that Bann Trevelyan wanted Evie around for... what? A heir incubator, since all the other children proved to be disappointing in that regard? That part, at least, would make some sort of sense. Bann Trevelyan can really go fuck a tree stump, as far as Margo is concerned. “Then what happened, sweetheart?”

Evie shrugs and hugs her legs to herself, resting her chin on her knees.

“It got better, in a way. Bann Trevelyan said he had found a solution. I was maybe... twelve? No. Thirteen. I remember because I got my... my...”

“Your monthlies?” Margo guesses.

Evie nods and blushes. “Yes. And Aunt Lucille said I was a woman grown, now. And Bann Trevelyan said it’d all be alright from there, that we were out of the worst of it. That’s when mom stopped coming.”

Margo frowns, doing the math. If Evie's mother disappeared around age five, the likelihood of her sneaking around undetected for seven years seems pretty damn slim. So dead seems more likely.

And also, she has the distinct feeling that Evie is skirting around something.

"What about 'the others.' The ones you didn't tell anyone about? Did they still come after that?"

Evie shakes her head. "No. Well, just the one. And that was just the one time." The kid's cheeks turn an incandescent sort of pink, and she stares fixedly at her cup. "But never after that. That was it. It was just once, to say goodbye."

Margo frowns. This seems important — this visitor, whoever he, or she — is. And the blush, too, seems important. "Can you tell me who it was? That visited you to say goodbye?"

Evie shakes her head. "I can't. I'm sorry. I..." She looks at Margo. "I would tell you if I could. I actually want to tell someone, and you've been such a good friend and listener and... And I don't have many of those, in case that wasn't really obvious." Evie's rueful smile seems entirely too grave for her young face. "But I... It won't... come out. Every time I even try to think about it, it sort of slips away. Other things pop into my head that have nothing to do with anything, too. Like... I don't know, what the masonry looks like in the keep's cellars, or the pattern on the back of Aunt Lucille's rocking chair. Or the taste of candied apples. They're... good thing, but it's like my mind finds a distraction just so I don't think about... well. The other one. I'm sorry — I sound completely mad, don't I?"

"No, kiddo, you don't." Margo rubs her forehead. All right. She will sort through this later. There is the other problem they have to deal with. The luck siphon.

"Evie, hun, can I ask you a really weird question?"

Evie's eyes widen, but then she nods.

"Have you always been... lucky? As in strange, dangerous things would happen to you, but you'd somehow come out alright?"

The kid shrugs with a puzzled frown. "It wasn't like that when I was really young, I don't think. Not that many bad things happened then. Not while mom still visited. She'd tell me these amazing bedtime stories, you know? Anyway, no. And I wasn't always this clumsy, either — it got worse right after my cycles came in. Aunt Lucille said I'd age out of it — that it's typical when your body is growing — but I guess I never did."

Margo tries to sort through the mess of information. So. Around the time when Evie hits puberty, the luck siphon manifests. Bann Trevelyan claims to have found a solution to whatever it is that he found problematic about his younger daughter. Whatever said solution entails, it seems to interfere with what was happening with Evie before. Random coincidence? Or causation? Primarily, the visitations from her probably dead mother stop. And from the 'others,' whoever the hell they are.

"Evie, can you tell me about the 'others'?"

"Mostly just... other kids, you know. They were my friends. Millie, and Lauren, and Graham. There weren't that many kids my age when I was growing up."

Now Margo is completely and utterly confused. What's wrong with Evie playing with other kids her age? Is this a class issue? Were they servants' children? "Did Bann Trevelyan not want you to play with them because they were socially beneath you?"

Evie frowns, thinking. “Well... I didn’t think he’d like it, so I never told him about it, and he never caught us. Millie, I guess, was an elf. Like you. She was the kitchen maid’s daughter. And Lauren... Lauren was really sweet, and she really liked books, and would ask me to read to her because she couldn’t read, you know? And Graham... Well, Graham had been sick for a really long time. Since he was a baby. In fact, he still had a bit of a cough, even after he got better. I think it was more force of habit.”

Margo has the distinct feeling she is missing something crucial. What does the mother have to do with any of it?

Or the dog? Something about that dog is really bugging her.

“But you can’t remember the fourth one? The one who visited later?”

Evie blushes furiously again. “Oh it wasn’t like th-... I mean, I remember. I just...” She shakes her head. “I can’t say it. I’m sorry.”

Margo is about to ask another question, but a knock on the door interrupts her thought. They both jerk upright.

“Herald!” Cassandra. “Please come at once. We need you in the war room.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Bann T's questionable parenting.

As always, thank you for your reading eyes and comments.

Next up: Libraries and Dorian

Ex Libris

Chapter Summary

In which Margo encounters an ambassador, a mage, and some questionable literature.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

After Evie and Cassandra depart — next to the Seeker’s ramrod straight figure, Evie’s frame looks even more diminutive than usual — Margo decides that the first order of business is to write down as much of the kid’s account as she can before she forgets some detail that will turn out to be relevant later.

Evie’s recollections fail to arrange themselves into a sequential story — the confession is fragmentary, redundant in places, with parts that seem to loop back on themselves. As if it took the young woman serious cognitive effort to piece even that much together. Although perhaps she simply never had the chance to share it with anyone before — much like official histories, these sorts of things order themselves in the telling, through repetition. Until then, it’s just fragments, a scattered sort of thing, as Baba would say.

She could probably beg Varric for writing implements, but it would be nice to actually *own* something — now that she has a few coins to spend. Then again, according to Varric, the only merchant in Haven tends to overcharge.

On the other hand, he’s probably never encountered the heir apparent to Baba’s ruthless haggling.

Margo walks over to the little stall and surveys the wares. Most of Seggrit’s inventory consists of swords that look like they were only recently shovels, along with a few shields that bear a suspicious resemblance to crate lids. Forget mages. They need more merchants, too. What does this guy do, resell whatever junk he’s found in some random barrel somewhere?

“Master Seggrit? Do you sell writing implements?”

The blond man graces Margo with a condescending look. “What do you need that for? Since when is your kind literate?”

Margo bristles. Right. Gross overgeneralizations about an entire category of people based on the fact that many of them live in appalling conditions, are exploited, and probably don’t have access to education. What could possibly go wrong with that model? “Since before you lot were shitting in the snow and rubbing sticks together to make fire,” she offers pleasantly. “So, do you have them, or not?”

Perhaps not the wisest strategy, come to think of it, but well worth it, just to see the merchant’s expression of shocked outrage. He extracts a poorly bound journal and a graphite stick, drops them on the counter in front of Margo, and crosses his arms over his chest. “Ten bits.”

“Not for that quality of product, it isn’t.” She pinches the journal. “That parchment isn’t even stabilized properly. I’ll give you five.”

She's got eight copper coins in her pocket. At some point, she will need to consider the problem of income.

"Nine." The merchant's expression graduates from snooty to suspicious. Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't that. "Final offer," he adds, but with a note of uncertainty.

"Six, and not a copper more."

"Greedy knife-ears," he mumbles. "Seven."

"Fine."

Commodity exchange completed, Margo turns on her heels and heads straight for the temple. She could, of course, go consult with someone first — Varric, perhaps, or Solas — to help her interpret some of her findings. But it feels... wrong. Evie's story is too raw and her own knowledge too incomplete. She can't sort what's important to share with the others from what's too private and offered, however inadvertently, in confidence.

What she really needs is a library.

She gives Torquemada's tent a wide berth. At some point, it would be very useful to learn that fade-into-the-shadows trick that the late Jan used to practice.

If the Haven chantry had a library, where would it hide? Minaeve's Office of Unpleasant and Likely Unethical Research into Dead Things' Remains is in here, so that might be as good a place to start as any.

Down the hall Margo notices a small group of nobles — at least, she assumes they might be nobles considering the excess of brocade — all adorned with what looks to be the Thedas edition of Viennese carnival masks. They are clustered around a woman in an aggressively frilly dress of yellow satin. Judging by the dramatic gesticulation, the nobles are in the process of venting some grievance.

The woman — striking in a vaguely Mediterranean sort of way — suddenly turns in the direction of Margo's footsteps. Initial puzzlement is quickly traded for a studiedly charming smile. She bobs her head and gestures at Margo with a writing tablet.

Uh-oh.

"Agent! You must be Master Adan's new apprentice, yes? May I have a word?" Her speech is lightly accented, a phonemic arrangement vaguely reminiscent of some Romance language, though Margo decides not to make overly hasty assumptions about any linguistic parallelism. "If you will excuse me for a moment, Messieurs?"

Margo waits her turn.

"I apologize we did not have occasion to speak earlier! That is... an oversight on my part." The woman offers another winsome smile. "Enchanter Minaeve's account of your progress in alchemy is very positive."

Well. That's a surprise.

"I am Josephine Montilyet, Ambassador to the Inquisition. And your name is..."

"Margo." Margo says. "Lovely to meet you, Ambassador."

Lady Montilyet nods. “Quite right! I beg your pardon — it is sometimes difficult to keep track of Leliana’s rotating roster of code names for her operatives. I have...” She lowers her voice, punctuating it all with a performatively furtive look. “I have a somewhat delicate request to make of you.”

Trouble. Here it comes. “Of course, how may I be of service?” Margo inquires with a neutral smile.

Lady Montilyet nods, apparently encouraged by Margo’s pleasantly polite affect. No accounting for taste.

“As you have no doubt noticed, the Inquisition is sadly lacking in some amenities. We have a number of noble guests, understandably unaccustomed to Haven’s more... austere conditions.” The Ambassador’s lips curl in a suspiciously mischievous smile. “Some of them are experiencing unfortunate difficulties. The food, I suppose, is rather heavy and lacks in variety, and the ‘accommodations’ for... ahem attending to the body’s inevitable needs are all rather basic. Leliana, of course, strives to remind our visitors that Haven is a site of religious communion — not a mountainside retreat — but I fear our guests are not as interested in the edification of the spirit through the renouncement of basic comforts as our spymaster might wish.”

Margo makes a truly epic effort not to snort. Right. Trying to ‘accommodate’ in the woods, with wolves howling in the distance is not conducive to healthy bowel movements. She lowers her voice to match the Ambassador’s. “I’m sure a mild aperient would suffice? I can deliver it to Enchanter Minaeve to distribute to those who are experiencing... umm... troubles.”

Lady Ambassador beams at her. “That would be most helpful! I knew I could count on your understanding. And your discretion.”

Margo gives her a formal little bow. It seems like proper protocol. Whipping up some laxatives for the nobles? She can certainly do that. Whatever helps the cause. “Lady Montilyet, while I have your attention. Is there a library I may be able to use?”

If the Ambassador is surprised by this request, she doesn’t show it. “Oh, most certainly! Although I am afraid that it is — like everything else — somewhat limited. The office I share with Enchanter Minaeve primarily has my own collection, which is heavy on political texts. But you will find a temple library available for public use right through the hall. Its organization is a little... idiosyncratic, but I trust you will find it adequate otherwise.”

The ambassador gestures towards a small door at the other end of the colonnade.

Margo offers her another formal bow — with a thought that a collection of political texts sounds most interesting too — and makes to leave in the direction indicated. Something catches her eye. Through the door to Minaeve’s and the ambassador’s office she spots a large wooden desk. It sports a vase with crystal grace flowers.

Aha! Could it be... But who are they for? Minaeve, or the ambassador? If she were a betting woman, she would guess the latter. And if so, good on the Bear. She wonders briefly how such courtship might be received. Social class does seem to matter in Thedas. Perhaps they’re both content with Courtly Love?

The library is truly a work of wonder. Not because it is well-stocked — it is not. And certainly not because it has rare, specialized literature — at first glance, and safe for a few exceptions, the books

look like cheaply made editions. After Margo circumambulates the small room a few times with an increasingly bemused frown, she finally comes to a stop and forces herself to come to grips with the full horror of the situation.

The books are organized by color.

Who did this?

After two more circumambulations, she locates some promising texts. Her first find is a large alchemical tome, with *Property of Alchemist Taigen. Hands off, blight you!* scrolled on the inside cover. Another volume titled *Ritual Scarification and Bodily Alteration among the Peoples of Thedas*, which may or may not be relevant. A third walk around the room lends a well-worn, slightly greasy tome called *The Abomination and the Woman Who Loved It*. Margo leafs through that one first. Lots of “throbbing” and “swooning,” a number of “heaving bosoms,” one or two “gasping in ecstasy,” and some implausible applications of geometry bring her to the conclusion that this will likely not explain Aunt Lucile’s moniker for Evie. Right, then. Rated “two out of five scarves fluttered” by the Rowdy Dowager, according to the back cover. She wonders what five fluttering scarves might look like. She puts that one back on the shelf. Another time, maybe.

A few more books on magic, including a glossary of Ferelden magical terminology, and Margo settles into her work.

She transcribes as much of her conversation with Evie as she can remember, writing a rudimentary timeline of the significant events, marking the pivotal points with an X. One at around age five, and one at puberty. She draws a stylized sun right above the first one. Ritual? Medical procedure? Above the second one, she writes “Bann Trevelyan’s Final Solution.”

She jots down the keywords that she might be able to search in some index. Abomination. Mabari. What else seemed significant? The names of the three children. She draws a plus sign, and adds “the other one,” followed by a question mark. She sketches a tentative kinship diagram for the figurants of the story.

She is so absorbed by her work that she registers the footsteps only vaguely and fails to lift her head at their approach. Another library patron. Nothing unusual about that.

“Oh! Someone actually using the library! You Southerners never fail to surprise me.”

Margo looks up. It’s the flashy fellow from the courtyard. Before she has time to decide how to react to this new arrival, the man turns to the shelves with an irritated expression on his face. He taps his chin with a finger in the universal gesture for “where could that book be located?”

Margo considers the intruder. He appears to be in his early or mid thirties. Everything about him suggests fastidious self-care — which brings Margo to the conclusion that this is likely a local noble. His facial hair makes him look like an escapee from an 18th century portrait of a fashionably disreputable Spanish aristocrat.

“Now. I don’t suppose you’ve come across anything on forbidden magics in here. Let’s see... No... No... A truly impressive collection of books on martyrs, though. Who knew there were so many? *The Trials and Tribulations of Sister Lucinda*. Fascinating, no doubt.”

Margo wants to go back to her work, but the poor chap’s expression is undergoing a fascinating metamorphosis from puzzled to befuddled to horrified.

“Wait a moment. These books are organized by...”

“Color,” she offers grimly and tsks sympathetically at his look of shocked outrage.

“That is... astounding.” He returns to browsing the shelves with an expression somewhere between entertained and appalled, and Margo dives back into her work.

The ethnographic monograph on ritual scarification lends nothing particularly productive: lots of potentially fascinating details on Chasind ornamental scarring and the use of red clay and charcoal to add color to the designs, but other than that, no suns. Her eyes keep returning to the very tempting alchemy tome. Maybe she can just take a quick peek, and then she will get back to her task. She stays her hand and leafs through the terminology glossary. A... A... Aha. Abominations are apparently mages whose will has been dominated by a demon — or a spirit — and who are being meat-puppeted by remote from the Fade. Minimally, this fits the definition Evie supplied — nothing in there about corpses or other unlawfully animated creatures.

Wait. Is that what she is? Is her own spirit actually in the Fade, puppeteering Maile’s body? She’s pretty sure she’s actually located inside the body, for what it’s worth, but... She narrows her eyes. Is this what Cosmic Asshole wants from her? Is he just jostling for “turf?” Can non-mages be abominated?

Focus. Right. Why would Aunt Lucille call Evie an abomination? Was dear Auntie providing a technically accurate definition or was she just being a cantankerous hag? With a sigh, Margo relinquishes the book in favor of Master Taigen’s manual, with firm plans to borrow it indefinitely after checking with Josephine.

“Oh, what’s this? Something on abominations?” That’s the flashy fellow again. Margo looks up, startled out of her inspection of the tome’s glossary and momentarily concerned that the fellow had somehow managed to read over her shoulder. No. He is still where he was. The volume he is turning around in his hands is familiar, too.

“Something tells me that one’s probably not an accurate account,” she comments cautiously.

“No?” He leafs through the book with commendable composure. “Let us check. Hmm. Yes, perhaps a little heavy-handed in its use of ‘turgid.’ Hmm. In its defense, it does diversify. I see a few instances of ‘throbbing.’” He turns a couple of pages before reporting back, his mustache twitching with barely suppressed mirth. “Ah, we are now at ‘engorged,’ half a chapter into it, no less. Oh, and back to ‘turgid.’ Now, *that* is gratuitous cruelty. That much ‘turgidity’ would become most uncomfortable after a while, unless abominations are functionally different in that regard, which I suppose might make for an interesting proposition. It would certainly explain some things...”

Margo grins. “Who’s it by?”

“Apparently, by Varric Tethras. A companion volume to his rather popular *The Tale of the Champion*, according to this codicil here.” He gives Margo a puzzled look. “Now, is this the same Varric Tethras as...” He gestures vaguely towards the door.

At this point, Margo can’t resist. She gets up and walks over to examine the purported salacious addition to Varric’s bibliography. “May I?” She squints at the title page. Aha! “No, look, the ink is different and the parchment has been buffed out right around... here. I think the author’s name was replaced. And this part looks like it was added later, but the font is a decent imitation.”

The fellow is nodding. “Yes... Yes, you are absolutely right! A counterfeit? Though rather amateurishly done. How very intriguing!” He looks down. “Excuse my manners, I suppose introductions are in order. I am Dorian of House Pavus, most recently of the Tevinter Imperium.”

Margo tenses. That's the Tevinter mage?

Whatever is in her expression, he notices.

"Not quite what you expected? Let me guess — not sinister enough?"

Margo considers him. "Your countrymen do seem to have a reputation for it."

Dorian of House Pavus strikes her as someone with a pretty robust sense of humor. That doesn't quite square with her admittedly superficial expectations. Not that Maile's impressions were "superficial," as it were, but apparently that sort of activity does not lend sufficient data to make any generalization about national character.

"We do! We are also known for our punctuality. We always perform our blood magic and human sacrifices fastidiously on time."

"No one likes a sacrifice that starts fashionably late?" Margo ventures.

Dorian gives her a dazzling smile. "Exactly! And you are?"

She's so nonplussed by the mismatch between her preconceived notions about what a Tevinter mage should be like and the actually existing specimen that she blurts out "Margo Duvalle" before she can adapt it.

That seems to confuse the mage for a few seconds. "Not a very elven name, is it? Duvalle, you say? Is that the house which employed you? And Margo... is that the Rivaini Amargara? Or the Orlesian Margarite?"

Margo has a vague recollection that amargare means bitter in Spanish. Is Rivain to Spain what Orlais is to France? Either way, the slip will require some repair work. She will need to be more careful in the future. "The name is just a classificatory heuristic while I am in the spymaster's employ. They tend to change when needed. As to your other question, I suppose I have a rather mixed background," she offers evasively.

"By your accent, I would have guessed... Nevarran?"

Interesting. Adan had identified her accent as from somewhere in Seheron.

Introductions concluded, Dorian returns the "Abomination" back to the shelf and walks over to Margo's working desk. "An alchemist, are you?"

Margo shrugs. "An apprentice, technically. You're the mage the Herald met in Redcliffe?"

Dorian gives her a quizzical look. "A well informed apprentice alchemist! Yes, I suppose I am that." He pauses, seemingly considering his next move. And then he notices her notes. Her chicken scratches are probably not legible to anyone but her — they're hardly legible to her on most days — but his gaze lands on her drawing of the little sun.

"The Rite of Tranquility..." Uttered with ominous gravitas. "One of those things that the Imperium shares with you southerners, though of course the Magisters use it with somewhat greater discernment. To silence political rivals, for instance."

Tranquility...tranquility... Why does this ring a bell? Ah! Of course! One of her first conversations with Solas, right after the debacle with the wolves. Something about damaging a spirit? No, that's not quite it...

While she's thinking, Dorian helps himself to Master Taigen's manual. "Oh, an entire three pages on poisonings! How precious! Of course, had your Chantry not banned *The Alchemical Primer* ... Does this work of rustic genius have an index? Let us see what this Master Taigen thought about transmogrifying metals..." He closes the book for a moment. "Have you ever wondered what might become of us — both your southern Circles and ours, rather strikingly different though they might be — should our dwarven friends one day decide to redirect their supply routes? Or — perish the thought — cut us off? Or, worse, should lyrium one day simply run out? No more lyrium — no more Tranquils! Would we survive, do you think?"

"Would you survive the inevitable resource wars, you mean?" Margo answers absentmindedly. What is the connection between lyrium and tranquility? Is tranquility a kind of alchemical procedure? "From what I heard of Tevinter, you'd have a bad time of it. No offense."

"A politically savvy alchemist!" The sardonic tone conceals the slight note of surprise, and Margo silently berates herself for not keeping her mouth shut when silence would have been golden.

"I mean, it's obvious, isn't it? It's not just in the magical potions, it's practically in everything." She takes the tome back and finds the Minerals section. "Here, let's see." Lyrium, of course, has its own dedicated chapters. She thumbs through quickly. And then, under the section titled "other applications," her hand freezes.

"Oh. Holy shit," Margo mutters.

Under the inscription "Rite of Tranquility," she spots the telltale design of the little stylized sun.

"Holy, no. Shit... Well, sometimes. No one wants to talk about that, of course. Violently severing mages from their connection to the Fade? What? I thought it would be simple! Snip, snip, all done!" He sighs. "Accidents happen." And then he gives her another one of his quizzical looks. "Now, why would an apprentice alchemist be looking into this particular procedure? Is the Inquisition thinking of branching out?"

"Master Adan doesn't spend much time instructing me in alchemical theory, so I'm just trying to learn as much as I can on my own." It's not even a particularly egregious prevarication. "Also, I don't think I've ever met a Tranquil," Margo redirects. "What are they like?"

That gives the Tevinter mage pause. "No? Well, I suppose you are not a mage. From what I understand, you southerners prefer to keep them inconspicuous. In my experience, they become... emotionless. No, that's not quite right. They are passionless. They have no desires other than to continue an undisturbed existence. We in Tevinter tend to use them in a research capacity — they are a marvel for that. They never get bored." He pauses. "Now, that's quite the proposition."

Margo feels the ground shift from under her.

But Evie isn't emotionless. If anything she's overly emotional.

"Can it be reversed?" she asks her new helpful informant. At least this one doesn't try to kiss her each time she's scratching at the threshold of some kind of insight. She'd find that delightfully ironic, all things considered, except she's too busy contemplating the profound horror of what was potentially done to the kid.

"Not that I am aware of." He pauses. "You do seem awfully interested in this question. May I ask why?"

Margo looks at the "Vint." She could just outright lie. She has absolutely no reason to trust this

guy — she doesn't know him from Adam. But... He seems to speak his mind, and this endears him to Margo quite a bit. People who don't talk in cryptic half-truths. Why aren't there more of them?

"Why are you here, Lord Pavus?" she asks instead. "Really. What brought you all the way to Redcliffe, and from Redcliffe all the way to Haven?"

He gives her a speculative look, and Margo has the distinct impression that's he's deliberating at a fork in the road. "Why my own two feet, of course! And an unwashed sort of fellow with a horse and a buggy."

Margo narrows her eyes at him.

"Oh, very well. If you must insist. Just don't give me that squint again, it's terrifying. It was my mentor. Gereon Alexius. Brilliant mage, path breaking researcher, best mentor someone like me could have wished for, and much better than I deserved."

Margo has the distinct feeling that there is another shoe suspended somewhere, and that it is about to drop.

"Until, that is, he decided to experiment with dangerous, highly unstable magic and, I suspect, used it to annex the Redcliffe mages right from under the nose of your illustrious organization."

Margo frowns. Does this mean that the mages Evie was meant to negotiate with are now off the chess board? She isn't sure whether that's a good, or a bad thing, all things considered.

Then she returns to the problem at hand. Someone else is good at redirecting, as it appears. "But that still doesn't exactly explain why you're *here*."

The mage shifts in place with a nervous, impatient tension to his movements that seems born out of some profound, deep-seated contradiction. But it isn't an unfamiliar one. And if she were to guess, she'd identify it as the ambivalent, uncertain concern for one's intellectual mentor. Perhaps this Gereon Alexius was to Dorian what her PhD advisor was to her. The man who filled the hole in her kinship diagram left by her father's death. The person who molded her intellectual trajectory, who shaped her thoughts over years of careful, considerate, though sometimes frustrating cultivation. And who, in the end, made her at least partially the woman she is. She can certainly see how the feeling that accompanies such a relationship would inspire someone to take action.

"I am here because I want to help. Is that so hard to imagine?"

Apparently being a Tevinter mage in Ferelden puts one on the defensive. She doesn't bite. In the absence of an argument from her, a fraction of the tension seems to drain out of him.

"I am afraid Alexius has lost his way. I had hoped the Inquisition would help me stop him from doing more damage — to others, and to himself. Surely your organization can see the value in such an alliance."

Margo nods.

"I can. But it's not up to me. I'm just a... lackey."

He gives her a skeptical look. "Dangerous work, that. But somehow I doubt that's entirely true. In any case, I should return to Redcliffe soon. Not all of your magically inclined countrymen are pleased with Alexius's arrangement with the Grand Enchanter, by the way. Something to consider."

With that, he gives her a slightly theatrical bow and makes for the exit.

“It was nice to meet you, Lord Pavus,” Margo calls after him.

“Of course it was! I am witty and charming. A pleasant change, I’m sure.”

Margo chuckles. Well, what do you know. She actually does like the Vint.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by my endless amusement at the idea that someone in Thedas might have been writing badly written smutty fanfiction of the Tale of the Champion and trying to pass it for an original.

Next up: Spy games

Socratic Method

Chapter Summary

In which Margo fails to persuade Leliana, spars with a Qunari operative, and recruits Varric.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

One tome on dog domestication later, and Margo decides that the Mabari, while a fascinating species, gets her absolutely nowhere in terms of understanding Evie's story. She still has no idea at all why the damn dog was important, except for the nagging feeling that she is missing something crucial and likely utterly self-evident. Something that had led to Aunt Lucille's comment about needing to train Evie?

The most plausible conclusion is that Evie must have shown some capacity for magic — or, perhaps, manifested *something* her family interpreted as such. It fits, however oddly — Aunt Lucille's comment about training Evie elsewhere, the odd sunburst brand, Bann Trevelyan's protracted efforts to medicate his child.

The dog, however, doesn't fit. Is there some kind of special canine magic that Evie's family would have found especially alarming?

Margo gathers the alchemy manual she wants to appropriate before heading out of the room, with the firm intention to ask Lady Montilyet for permission first. Rogue or not, you don't steal books from a library.

The ambassador is not in her office, but Minaeve is, so Margo asks the elven researcher instead.

"No one else has taken much of an interest," the enchanter replies tersely to Margo's stumbling and somewhat circuitous request. "Check with Adan if he wants it, but otherwise, I see no reason why you would not be able to borrow it."

Book acquired, Margo heads out of the chantry, her thoughts heavy with apprehension.

There is really no clean ethical solution to this. Can you betray one person's confidence for the benefit of others? The entire purpose behind finding more about Evie's past pivots around the pragmatics of the luck siphoning vortex. And this, in turn, hinges on keeping as many of her friends — and the Inquisition's assets — safe.

But if she brings her suspicions to light, what will be done to the kid? The locals aren't exactly enthusiastic about the concept of untrained mages, if that is indeed what Evie is. From what she understands, a Rite of Tranquility would have been performed in a Circle of Magi, under strict supervision. How typical is it for one to be undertaken "at home" — again, if this is indeed what befell the poor kid.

Besides, nothing so far connects the luck siphon to what may or may not be a Tranquility scar. She is missing something.

Margo is so absorbed by the unsolvable ethics of the Gordian knot that she fails to execute her previously successful evasive maneuver, and she stumbles right upon Torquemada's tent. In addition to Torquemada in the flesh, the tent also contains Evie, who has apparently extricated herself from whatever planning the Seeker had recruited her for. A tall fellow in the heinous lettuce-green ensemble worn by the spymaster's pawns looms in the shadows.

The trio is in the middle of a hushed but tense conversation.

"There are so many questions surrounding Farrier's death. Did Butler think we wouldn't notice?"

Apparently, someone had the audacity to mess with the spymaster, and it might be useful to figure out what the exact consequences of such a course of action might be. Nothing good, no doubt. Margo inches closer to the tent flap, with the bleak certainty that trying to eavesdrop on Torquemada is about as wise (and as likely to end in success) as trying to cross the Pacific ocean in a washbasin.

"He's killed Farrier, one of my best agents," the redhead continues. "And knows where the others are." After a pregnant pause — the kind that's about to hatch a xenomorph — the spymaster shakes her head. "You know what must be done. Make it clean."

Margo looks at Evie. It's pretty obvious what Torquemada just ordered. And whoever Butler is — and however much he has screwed the pooch — this, to Margo, feels like a pivotal moment. It isn't even about Butler, strictly speaking. It's about Leliana herself. If there is a seedling of humanity left inside Comrade Nightingale's Kevlar-plated outer shell, it certainly could use some sunlight and warmth right about now, before it dies a quiet, forgotten and entirely inglorious death. Someone has to stop her from snowballing down the slippery slope of justified but casual brutality.

Evie just stares at her feet, fiddling with the edge of her winter coat — and says nothing. And for the first time, the feelings of protective warmth and concern that the young woman normally evokes are substituted with a profound, irritated disappointment. Margo stamps out the emotion, conjuring the image of the sun scar — a silver ghost on the girl's forehead, glimpsed by accident, and now carefully concealed behind a layer of makeup and bangs.

Evie didn't choose this. Which, in turn, begs the question of just how many things she didn't choose in general.

The annoyance vanishes under a pile of shame.

Still. Maybe Evie just needs someone to amplify her a bit, to allow her the space to speak. Margo quickly scans the girl's body language. A tense rigidity seems to have settled into the young woman's stance, and the crease between her brows is especially pronounced. Like that student in class who clearly wants to speak up but hasn't found her voice yet.

"Spymaster?" Shit. This is probably going to backfire in some spectacular way, but she won't be able to sleep at night if she doesn't at least try. Her sleeping habits are already less than optimal — considering she has to resort to assisted sleeping via elven apostate. More guilt over opportunities lost won't improve the situation.

"Ah, agent. Kind of you to join us. Do you have something to contribute?"

Evie turns around, and gives Margo a scared — but hopeful — look.

"Is murdering Butler in some dark alley truly the wisest course of action?"

Oh dear Unspecified and Vilely Sardonic Deity, she's going to regret opening her mouth, isn't she?

Comrade Nightingale's expression has adopted its usual corvid and vaguely carnivorous cast. "And what would you have me do, agent? Let Butler betray more of my people? Curious how your ethics dictate restraint when those who would do us harm are concerned — why is that, I wonder?"

Before Margo can respond, they are both startled by the sound of a quiet voice. It's timid and awfully embarrassed at taking up conversational space. But there's something there. A kind of underlying depth, perhaps. Whatever Evie might be, Margo doesn't think she's passionless. Certainly not like anything Dorian described when he mentioned Tranquils. "I... I don't mean to interrupt. But I think Margo might be right. Sister Nightingale, you shouldn't just kill Butler. Not like that. Shouldn't he have the chance to explain himself?"

Leliana turns to the source of this revolutionary proposal. "Herald?" The look of surprise sits awkwardly on the spymaster's features. And then the expression reverts back to the usual terrifyingly affable mask, all sharp steel and dark things. "Now is truly not the time for maudlin ideals."

Margo notes Evie's hands balling up into fists at her sides. "I... I didn't..." The kid clears her throat, but when she speaks, there is a small steely note beneath the fumbling. "I didn't realize ideals kept to a strict schedule." The voice is so quiet it's barely audible. "Are they off-duty? Because if so, then maybe I could come back when they're back at their post."

Margo's eyes widen. Is the kid actually taking the piss? She can't tell with any certainty: Evie looks naively earnest — not, in any way, sarcastic or wry — if you ignore the white knuckles. Margo is not the only one who is nonplused. The spymaster measures Evie with a guarded look, momentarily startled out of some habitual state of numb implacability. And, for a second, it seems that Torquemada might be vacillating.

The spymaster's frown deepens. "Lady Trevelyan. *Herald*. I am certain that it has not escaped your attention that the Inquisition has achieved remarkably little during the admittedly brief history of its reformation. The mages and Templars situation stays unresolved. Refugees still suffer. Innocents suffer. We have barely enough influence to secure basic necessities, let alone the social clout to convince anyone to ally with us or to offer us so much as logistical support. And this at a time when an alliance is desperately needed." Leliana crosses her arms. "Each day we fail to secure allies is another day the Breach remains. So, no. This is not a time for ideals. It is a time for difficult decisions. And if Andraste's Chosen is unwilling to make them, then someone must do so in her stead." All delivered with a layer of steel thick as an arm, but underneath it, Margo intuits another shape. Some kind of ancient and unresolvable ache, like the phantom pains of an old heartbreak.

Margo watches Evie deflate, as if all the air is sucked out of her along with the courage it took to confront the spymaster. She tries to conjure an argument that would allow Evie to find her footing again, or that might at least disrupt Leliana's course on vengeful efficiency. Some interjection that would not simply be dismissed on account of a dubiously trustworthy petitioner. She draws a breath. "Spymaster, surely there are politically preferable alternatives to back-alley murders. A trial, perhaps?"

Leliana, to Margo's surprise, doesn't try to incinerate her with her gaze — a pleasant contrast to her habitual *modus operandi*. Instead, she shakes her head, that old sadness still lingering at the corners of her eyes. "I wish there were, agent." She considers Margo with something that could almost pass for a human expression. "You are working to correct your mistakes, are you not? Perhaps I was much like you once — eager to do what it took yet intent on keeping my ideals. This achieved little. One cannot walk two roads at once." She lets out a short sigh. "The Maker cares not at all about our ethical equivocations. If He did, surely the Divine would still be alive. And Andraste, his

favorite, the one He held above all others, would have not have met her end on the pyre.”

At the mention of the Maker, Evie suddenly straightens. “Spymaster Leliana...” Evie’s hands are clasped in front of her in a strange imitation of prayer. “You’re right. I really don’t know much. And I know you all think me naïve and inept. But even *I* know you shouldn’t expect a pat on the head from the Maker every time you don’t act like a complete...umm... Asshat.”

For a brief moment, Leliana’s expression registers utter shock, as if Evie had slapped her. And then her eyes narrow and Margo realizes with a sinking feeling that this was the wrong thing to say. Maybe at a different time in the spymaster’s life, this argument would have gotten through her shields. But not anymore.

“Do not presume to school me in matters of faith, child. The Maker has taken everything from me. Yet, that does not seem to satisfy.” Frost creeps through the cracks in the dulcet cadence of bardic affectation. “When you lose everyone and everything you hold dear to the vagaries of His ineffable will, then we can have this conversation again. For now, you must excuse me. I have work to do.”

With that, they are dismissed.

They walk out together.

“That was brave of you. And the right thing to do,” Margo states firmly. Even if it didn’t get the desired result, it took plenty of courage to stand up to Torquemada. Certainly more than she’d managed to conjure up in her own conversations.

Evie’s face, tight and pale, remains set in an expression of thoughtful focus. She doesn’t say anything for a long time, and Margo allows for the silence to settle.

“I think the Spymaster can’t hear the Maker anymore,” the young woman remarks quietly, as if to no one in particular.

Margo cuts the girl a quick glance. “Can *you* hear the Maker, kiddo?”

Evie shrugs. “No. But I think I understand why Sister Leliana is so sad.” She pauses, a strange, forlorn look on her features. “I wish He’d still talk to me too.”

Evie, still oddly subdued, excuses herself quickly and walks back towards her hut. Margo is left standing in the street. The weather is turning stormy once again. Heavy grey clouds laden with unshed snow hang so low they feel like a lid over the mountain landscape. Even the Breach is nothing but a faint glow tinting the leaden skies a sickly green.

She walks over to the training grounds, intent on keeping her sparring date with the Ben Hassrath. She has the distinct suspicion that any avoidance tactic will result in more double-edged questioning, but without the benefit of keeping up appearances. How much of an interrogation can he really mount while they’re whacking at each other remains to be seen.

The Iron Bull is by his tent. When he spots her, he gives Margo a brief nod. She walks over. Might as well bite the bullet — before it bites right back.

“Thought you wouldn’t show,” he offers with a lazily speculative undercurrent to his tone, which Margo decides she doesn’t like one bit.

“And miss the pleasure of having your smack me upside the head some more? Not a chance.”

Her quip is met with a rumbling chuckle, but his good eye remains serious. “So. You wanna spar, then? Or you have other things in mind?”

She narrows her eyes. Again with the come-on that isn’t one. What is he playing at? They don’t have much of an audience this time — she can spot Krem talking to Master Harritt, but otherwise, none of the Charges are in sight.

She’s not cut out for spy games. Surviving this place already feels like trying to juggle too many balls — and maybe a couple of chainsaws to boot — and when it comes to juggling large, sharp, lethal objects, probability is not on your side.

“What’s this about, Bull? Do you have a problem with me?”

He shrugs. “Depends. I’ve made some inquiries about you. Nothing personal, you understand — that’s just how we roll. Guess you could say I got curious about your story. Thought a private conversation might suit you better than a public one.”

Margo cocks her head. “Sure, I’m happy to talk. But what’s with the propositioning?”

The Iron Bull gives her another one-shouldered shrug. “Figured I’d kill two birds with one stone. If you’re who your story suggests, you’d probably try to use sex to distract me. Not that it’d work —” another somewhat humorless chuckle “— but I don’t mind you giving it a shot. Then again, if you’re not — which is what I’m leaning towards — I thought I’d offer you a cover for why you and I are talking. Don’t think your spymaster’s ruled out the possibility that you’re Viddathari.” He pauses, just long enough to see whether the word provokes a reaction, but whatever he was expecting, it probably wasn’t Margo’s rather blank stare. The Qunari shrugs, the very picture of casualness. “The way this Inquisition’s run... It needs to be centralized to work, but they don’t have the habit of the system. Takes time to set up, get folks used to the idea. Right now, it’s too many people trying to lead while pretending they’re not in charge. Still, Leliana’s not crazy about relevant information passing her by, but if she assumes you’re just scratching an itch, she might think that’s all it is.” He pauses. “She won’t. But she could.”

Whatever the Viddathari are, they must have something to do with Torquemada’s original suspicion about the possibility of Maile’s spying for the Qun. Margo stifles a sigh. Whoever is in charge of shoving errant souls into bodies they’re not meant to occupy really has a vile sense of humor. Couldn’t she have gotten herself stuck in some dusty, not particular adventurous academic type somewhere? Surely, Thedas must have those too. “You know, Bull, I already have a miserable reputation. I’d rather not make it worse.”

Another noncommittal shrug. “Up to you. You and I are going to have a chat, though. And then we’ll talk about that luck thing you mentioned.”

How many times has he fought alongside Evie? Margo wasn’t under the impression that the kid leaned heavily on The Iron Bull in terms of who she chose to deploy. But since Cassandra was with them in the Mire, then that would have left Evie with either Blackwall or Iron Bull or both for the heavy front-liners. The Ben Hassrath might be many things — but unobservant isn’t one of them. It wouldn’t have taken him long to see that there was a pattern.

“We’ll talk,” Margo nods. “Can we train for now?”

He lets the pause stretch to the edge of awkwardness before inclining his head in acquiescence. “Suit yourself.”

They do train for about forty minutes, and the Qunari pulls no punches. Eventually, the no-holds-

barred nature of the combat forces Margo into a kind of meditative mindlessness, and from there, she allows her body do take over and go through the motions. Which it does, and she even manages to plant the giant bastard in the snow a couple of times, using his own mass and momentum against him.

She steps away from the training grounds sore, sweaty, exhausted, and likely mottled with a stunning collection of bruises — none of them on visible skin.

Strangely enough, The Iron Bull seems a lot less hostile after their session. “Some operatives fold under pressure,” he remarks affably. “You let me know when you’re ready to have that chat, Blondie.” And with that, he turns around and heads back towards his tent.

Margo rubs her face with both hands. She tries to make sense of his actions, but the whole experience just confounds her further. Was this a test? Or, more accurately, was this some perverse interpretation of the Socratic method taken to the next level, where not only do you not know the hypothetical answers, but you aren’t even sure what the question was.

Or whether there was a question.

She heads for the baths, hoping to catch the end of the women’s shift. The bored looking elf at the entrance takes one look at Margo, winces, and slips her a towel and a lump of soap without charging.

She makes quick work of washing herself and her underclothes. They’re still a little damp when she leaves, which, in the frigid weather, does not make for the most pleasant experience, but at least she’s no longer quite so stinky.

The apothecary is next. Margo is perfectly well aware that she is in a holding pattern, procrastinating what really needs to be done, but she decides to buy herself one more hour with making the laxatives, as per the ambassador’s request.

Adan, in the midsts of working on something called “essence of lightning,” according to the open formulary on his desk, doesn’t look up when she enters. In fact, he doesn’t look up at all — absorbed by the task of peering at something that looks suspiciously like mercury swishing at the bottom of a glass vial. “Look what the deepstalker dragged in,” he comments dryly.

Margo asks whether he wants help, but he just shakes his head before waving her off. “You need to pass your Journeyman examination to work with this stuff. If we’re all still alive in a month, we can talk about it.”

Margo hopes that whatever the Journeyman exam involves, it doesn’t require a draught that would add another cosmic asshole to her collection. She’d rather drink outright poison.

She processes the herbs — Auntie’s Compendium gives a simple enough recipe for a mild laxative that involves spindleweed, a mucilaginous plant that puts her in mind of the *Cynoglossum* genus. She prudently dons gloves, in case it is as toxic as its terran morphological equivalent. The directions to treat it are simple enough: peel the roots, crush them into a sticky, snotty paste, add elfroot, and roll into pills with molasses or honey.

Task completed, she sets the pills to solidify on a baking tray. Streamlining some of the heavily used tonics into pill form would be relatively easy, and it would save quite a bit of space for when the troops are in the field — the elfroot healing potion might not work, she decides, since a

decoction does absorb quicker, but for the restorative draught with warrant some experimentation. Pop a pill before battle, and off you go.

Adan takes a break from his activities to hand her a little purse full of coppers. “It’s not much,” he adds defensively. “But I’m not about to start withholding your pay just because the Inquisition can’t get its budget straight.”

Margo tucks the purse into her coat with a grateful smile. Income problem solved. For now.

Outside, the light wanes — part gathering blizzard, and part simply the fact that the day has managed to slip through her fingers. At this point, more procrastination is simply untenable. The longer she puts off what needs to be done, the larger the task will grow, until it feels impossible to tackle.

Adan lets her go without fuss, releasing her into the snowy gloom with another dismissive wave. For once, procrastination bore fruit, and Margo can now sense the contours of a decision. She cannot solve the Evie problem alone — that much is evident — but whatever can be shared of the kid’s story should not be disseminated widely. Not without more evidence, in any case. And so, it makes sense to start with those with whom it all began.

Since the prospects of being utilized as one of those unfortunate log dummies Cassandra likes to abuse does not appeal, Margo tracks down Varric first, hoping to outsource the task of recruiting the Seeker to him. The dwarf looks like he would make for a sturdy lightning rod to ground Cassandra Pentaghost’s potential ire.

The Inquisition’s local best selling author is, predictably enough, in the tavern, though Margo is vaguely surprised to find him sitting alone at a back table, scribbling something down in a journal. Probably working on his next book, she decides.

The tavern is hot and humid, the rough floor planks spotted with murky puddles of melting snow. The air is thick with the smells of cabbage, baked starch, and frying oil. It is still too early for the evening meal, and the crowds of soldiers and other regulars have yet to file in.

Margo orders two half-pints from Flissa and waves one of the glasses at Varric in lieu of a request for a seat.

“Oh-ho, Prickly! You’ve finally decided to pay up?” He gestures at the bench across from him.

Once she is settled, they clink their slightly foggy glasses together. “Varric, I think I need to call a meeting. I was hoping you’d help.”

The dwarf’s expression remains placid and vaguely amused, save for a mild tightening to his jaw and a slight squint to his coppery eyes. He considers her carefully over his ale. “If this is what I think it is, I take it you’d rather keep it small.”

Margo nods. “Would you ask Cassandra?”

Varric winces, managing to look simultaneously dubious and put upon.

“Please?” She decides against playing cute — her physique doesn’t exactly lend itself to conjuring that particular affect. And, besides, she’s not about to insult Varric’s intelligence. Best just fess up. “I find the The Seeker...” Margo fishes for an appropriate epithet. “A bit alarming.”

Varric chortles grimly. “That, Prickly, is like calling the Arishok ‘unaccommodating.’ But fine, I’ll fall on my dagger — but you owe me an ale.” His eyes glint in the torchlight. “And a story.

Whatever *did* happen to you at the Sword Coast? Really?"

Margo smiles blandly. "Ale it is. And I'll go get Solas. Let's start from there."

Varric inclines his head. His speculative squint morphs from acquisitive to teasing. He purses his lips. "And how much time should I give you and Chuckles before I go and fetch the Seeker?"

Margo offers him her best rendition of the Evil Eye. If it works on the Vint... "Maybe I should be asking you the same thing, hmm?"

That earns her a surprised if somewhat vexed little *hmpf*. "You know, Prickly, it is possible for two people to just dislike each other without it being code for something else."

At this point, it is Margo's turn to smirk. What's good for the goose... "For what it's worth, you two would make a formidable pair."

Varric crosses his arms over the impressive display of chest hair. "I like my romantic liaisons without a side of interrogation and possible torture, thank you very much." He takes a sip of beer, clearly satisfied with his rhetorical countermove.

Margo's teasing smirk turns a little wicked. "Just agree over a 'safe word' first. I bet your editor would say this has 'narrative potential'."

Varric almost chokes on his beer. "You're *actually* trouble, Prickly."

When Margo notices a faint dusting of color across the dwarf's cheekbones, she starts chortling in honest. Turnabout is fair play.

"Jests aside," Varric states with a pointed look. "We have bigger problems."

That, at least, she can't argue with. They finish their ales and agree to reconvene right after the evening chant.

"Where do you want to meet? Should be somewhere away from prying eyes. And ears. Preferably on neutral territory," Varric comments, all business.

Margo thinks for a few seconds. "Let's meet in Master Taigen's old hut. Do you know where it is? The only person who ever uses it is Adan. And I think he prefers to avoid it if he can."

Varric nods his agreement. Margo gets up to leave.

"It's bad, isn't it?" Varric calls after her, and she casts him a quick look over her shoulder. There's another one with a fatalistic streak, judging by his expression.

"It's... strange," she finally offers.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Margo and Evie failing their charisma roll.

Next up: Conspiracy theorists

Unremarkable

Chapter Summary

In which Margo shares her research with the team

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Margo tries Solas's cottage first in the dim hope that the universe might find itself in a merciful mood and provide her with a quick and easy answer, for once. She is entirely unsurprised when it does no such thing — the door remains closed and bolted, the windows dark against the remnants of the fading afternoon light.

Margo pulls her hood over her hair against the rapidly intensifying frost. The snowstorm is gathering quietly, but she can smell the shift in the air, like the breath of some ancient glacier — damp, bone-chilled, and mineral under the scent of snow. The little village is bracing itself in anticipation. Shutters are pulled tight from the inside and plumes of smoke rise over the rooftops from freshly reignited hearths. As she walks down the hill, she spots a few of the locals swinging axes to chop firewood.

She muses, in passing, over Haven's demographics. What was this place before it became the Inquisition's headquarters? Josephine had mentioned that it used to be a pilgrimage site. Most of the cabins are relatively simple, but they are also unusually standardized. Down to the portraits decorating the walls, which are oddly repetitive, as if commissioned in batches from some painters' guild.

Is Haven some kind of tourist infrastructure? The architecture doesn't look like it was intended for winter — perhaps most of the pilgrims were seasonal. It invites questions about Haven's non-military population. Did the Inquisition inherit Haven's hosteling staff when it commandeered the village? It would certainly explain the Chantry's ire, in addition to the accusations of heresy: no one likes to lose a strategic resource and the revenue it might generate.

Margo forces herself to refocus on the task at hand: namely, finding Solas. This is not the time to go off on tangents about local tourist economies. She walks through the village, spiraling out in widening circles, vaguely hoping that the elf isn't asleep somewhere completely unreasonable. Exploring whatever historical remainders — or reminders — the Fade absorbed and digested is all well and good, but perhaps best undertaken as a summer activity. If he is, indeed, asleep in some random hole, Margo finds herself hoping that it provides adequate shelter from the storm.

She finds them by the trebuchets. An unlikely pair: Solas, hands clasped behind his back, his face tilted upward, surveys the massive structure. A few paces away, Blackwall is crouching next to some mechanism at the base of the monstrous war machine. The Warden is prodding at a wooden gear with an expression of distracted disapproval. Margo hesitates for a second before walking over to them.

"Agent?" At the creaking of her footsteps on the snow, the Bear lifts his head and clears his throat, perhaps a tad unsure whether to address her by her name or her title. "Margo," he adds for good measure.

“Blackwall. Solas. Terrifying siege weapon.” She offers a nod in salute.

Blackwall’s eyes crinkle at the corners with an invisible smile, and then he pats the contraption like one might a reliable but aging draft horse. “Not a bad one, all things considered. If Cullen could get his oafs to oil it properly, it might even work. And check that the ropes aren’t fraying — this climate does a number on the fibers.”

Margo glances at Solas — long enough to catch the barest glimmer of a smile and the hint of a bow. “Are you well rested, lethallan?” he asks quietly.

She returns his slight bow. “Very much so.” Their gazes snag once again with that now all too familiar jolt of vertigo in the pit of her stomach — apparently, there’s no helping it — before Margo forcibly refocuses on the rock-tossing apparatus. “Thank you,” she adds under her breath.

Blackwall doesn’t seem to pay much attention to whatever subtext underlies her exchange with the mage — he is still absorbed by the trebuchet, except that now his forehead creases with concern. His gaze drifts over the palisade, sweeping over the darkening flank of the next mountain range. “On their own, they’re fine machines. But that doesn’t change the fact that there’s not enough of them.”

“Blackwall was just explaining to me that Haven, as it stands, is indefensible,” Solas offers conversationally.

Blackwall casts the elf an uneasy glance. “I didn’t say *indefensible*. I said *undefendable*. You’re twisting it around, Solas.”

“I merely extrapolated,” Solas comments with studied blandness. “Your exact words, as I recall, were ‘Maker’s balls, if this Inquisition thinks it can withstand an assault with three rotting rock-hurlers and this blighted goat fence they call a stockade, we’re in deeper...’” Solas’s lips purse in a smothered smile “... shall I continue?”

“I’d really rather you didn’t.” Blackwall clears his throat with a slightly guilty look in Margo’s direction, before breaking into a low chuckle. “The gist of it s’ all there, I’ll give you that .”

Margo looks between the two men. “Are we important enough for that to be an issue?” Because, of course, you only need defenses if someone cares enough to attack you.

“The Inquisition isn’t just an army, agent.” Blackwall pauses, mulling over whatever comes next. “In fact, it really isn’t much of an army at all. Right now, it’s mostly a symbol — and a symbol without swords behind it is an open invitation for trouble.” Whatever station his train of thoughts rolled into leads him to grimace. “Wars have been waged over less.”

Margo nods in understanding. Still. Some symbols have more potency than others. So far, she is not at all convinced that the Inquisition has captured the imagination of that many people. Sure, the Chantry is none too pleased about the potential competition, but what are the chances that they might mount a crusade to smite the heretics? “Military campaigns are expensive projects,” she offers cautiously.

Solas nods. “And that may be defense enough for now. However, hoping that the reasonable voice of avarice will deter the more fanatically inclined at perpetuity is a risky calculation, lethallan.”

“Well. Not much we can do about it at the moment.” The Warden straightens. “I have a hankering for a drink. You two care to join me?” He turns to Margo. “As I recall, I promised you a round back in the Mire, demons take that Maker-forsaken dunghole — though I guess they did that

already.” He glances at the elf. “Care for a rematch, Solas? No idea how you beat me the other night, but I wouldn’t mind winning my dignity back.”

At Margo’s puzzled look, Blackwall shakes his head in disgust. “Taught Solas diamondback before we left for the bog. He turned around and beat me at it. Lost everything. Had to walk back to my quarters with only a bucket for my bits.”

Margo cuts a surprised look at the elf. Solas remains entirely unrepentant — and not a little smug. She stifles a fit of rather undignified cackles.

“I am happy to part with your belongings, Warden Blackwall. I have little use for a full set of heavy armor.” Solas seems to be suppressing a grin, which, with nowhere else to go, percolates to his eyes. “I would gladly take you up on your offer of a rematch at a later date. Provided you have anything left to wager.”

Margo chortles quietly, but then the amusement is replaced by a pang of wistfulness. Why aren’t there more of these moments – glimpses of laughter and levity stolen from the grinding weight of catastrophe?

At the sound of the bell, they turn their heads synchronically towards the temple. The first notes of the evening chant carry faintly over Haven, strands of melody intertwining with the whistling wind.

“Solas, may I have a moment of your time?” She pauses, trying to phrase the statement in a way that won’t draw the Bear’s interest. “I need a mage’s advice regarding an alchemical procedure.”

Solas catches her gaze, his own eyes, a foggy grey in the dim glow of the remains of the day, gleam with an unuttered inquiry. And then he inclines his head. “Of course, lethallan.”

The three of them walk together towards the center of the village. Before bidding them farewell, Blackwall hesitates, shifting on his feet with obvious discomfort. “Eh... Margo. I’ve meant to thank you. For the...” He clears his throat again. “For the herbalism advice the other day.”

Margo frowns briefly before recalling the vase of crystal grace flowers on the ambassador’s desk. “Did it work as intended?” she asks.

Blackwall kicks the snow with the tip of an armored boot. “We’ll... ahem. We’ll see, I suppose.”

She nods. “Sometimes it takes more than one application.” She’s sorely tempted to wink at him, but she resists the compulsion, not wanting to embarrass the poor man more than he already is. “Keep at it.”

“I... Ahm.” He hesitates, on the verge of some other question. The storm’s first snowflakes flutter around them, briefly salting the warden’s dark hair before melting away. Blackwall casts a hostile glance at the heavens, shakes his head in dismissal, and walks off towards the tavern with a parting “Right, then.” Margo watches him retreat, his heavy footsteps muffled in the fresh snow.

She catches Solas’s quizzical gaze on her. “All is well with Warden Blackwall?” he inquires, his tone carefully neutral.

It’s not her secret to share, of course, but there is that slight hitch to the elf’s voice, a practically imperceptible shift in timbre, though one Margo is beginning to recognize. She doesn’t think that there are any proprietary claims between them — a couple of kisses does not a relationship make — but she knows vulnerability, however slight, when she hears it. And she is not one to exploit it just for the sake of a power kick.

She brushes her knuckles against the back of his hand, a brief gesture of assurance. “He is a good man. I hope his chosen pursuits won’t lead him to too much heartache.”

Solas peers at her before nodding his understanding. “An applicable wish for more than just our warden, I suppose,” he offers quietly.

His cool fingers twine around hers briefly, and then he lets go and clasps his hands behind his back once again. The warm and fuzzies rear their head, somewhat interrogatively, and Margo lets them know in no uncertain terms that now is really not the time. She stuffs her hands into her pockets, for lack of a better use for them. “Solas, I’ve called a meeting with Varric and Cassandra. Varric should be off recruiting the seeker, and I was in charge of fetching you.”

His expression turns from melancholy to sharply attentive. “You have discovered something, da’ nas?”

She nods.

“And the nature of your discovery has prompted you to gather a small circle of co-conspirators.”

It isn’t a question, but she nods again. “We meet at Master Taigen’s hut after the evening chant. I think we should walk separately, however.”

It is the elf’s turn to nod. “Agreed. Though please resist the urge to get eaten by wolves along the way.”

In Margo’s estimation, the evening prayer runs for about half an hour, so she heads back towards the apothecary, intent on gathering her notes and her books. Adan is absent, as per usual, though he left a sordid mess in his wake. She stuffs the journal into her knapsack — along with the treatise on dogs, and Master Taigen’s alchemy manual.

She checks on the pills. They have solidified nicely, so she collects them into one of the small woven satchels Adan keeps in a crate under the workstation. She writes out the label carefully, trying to ignore the feather’s awful squeaking. “For Lady Ambassador.” She considers what else to write — something euphemistic would probably be more suitable. Josephine did mention discretion. “To ease the process.” She leaves the parcel in the courier box by the door.

Tasks completed, Margo heads out and makes her way towards the old alchemist’s hut, hood pulled low against the twirling flurries.

She meets no wolves this time.

A faint, flickering light from the window casts an unsteady tawny square on the snow. A thin plume of grey smoke rises above the chimney, its contours just one shade lighter than the graphite gray of the sky.

Margo pushes the door open after tapping the snow off her boots.

As it turns out, she is the last one to arrive. Varric and Cassandra are sitting at a small table. Judging by their expressions, they have been bickering the entire time. Solas is leaning against a bookshelf and leafing through a tome on Chasind plant lore.

Varric smoothes out his scowl in favor of a sardonic smirk. “Fashionably late, Prickly.”

“My apologies,” Margo pulls her hood down and retrieves a crate from the corner to sit on. Solas returns the book back to its shelf and glides to stand against the wall next to Varric.

“I am not sure how I feel about secret meetings in abandoned houses, agent, but Varric was... very insistent.” There is an edge to Cassandra’s voice, some intractable emotion between exasperation and grudging curiosity.

Margo extracts her journal from her knapsack. She plops it down on the table, adding the alchemy manual for reference. This particular audience will be as friendly as it gets — which isn’t saying much. Both Solas and Varric might be willing to listen, at least. Cassandra, on the other hand, may prove a bit of a challenge. She will have to cater her message to her, then.

Before she can proceed, Varric interjects. “You can skip the prologue, Prickly. I’ve already debriefed the seeker about our theory on the whole luck bending mess. I figured it’d come across better from someone who can actually spin a story.”

Margo meets Cassandra’s gaze. “Does Varric’s explanation accord with your own experience, Seeker Pentaghost?”

Cassandra pauses before answering, and then, reluctantly, she nods. “Impossible as it seems, yes. There is moderate comfort in knowing that I have not been imagining things.”

“So what’d you find, Prickly. Don’t keep us in the dark.”

“I should preface this by saying I don’t know what this means. Or how to put it all together.” Margo flips through the alchemy tome until she locates the lyrium section, and then she finds the page with the Rite of Tranquility. She lets the book fall open, flipping it towards her companions. She takes a deep breath, exhales, and taps the image with her index finger. “Evie has a similar mark on her forehead.”

Varric’s eyes widen to the size of copper coins. Solas inhales sharply. Cassandra outright gasps.

“It cannot be,” the seeker shakes her head with such vehemence Margo wonders whether she underestimated her audience’s potential reticence. She looks to Varric for support, and not finding it on the dwarf’s suddenly grim features, turns to the elf. Cassandra crosses her arms over her chest with a mulish cast to her jaw. “I have met many Tranquils. I am certain the Herald cannot be one.”

“All right. Let’s all keep our heads and not jump to hasty conclusions.” Varric, with the habitual conciliatory gesture, leans back in his chair. “Start from the beginning, Prickly.”

And so, she does. With references to her scribbled notes and the timeline she managed to compose, Margo retells what she was able to piece together of Evie’s story. It takes more time than she thought it would, in part because she keeps interjecting her own uncertainties about each event and about their possible interpretation. Her companions remain silent and attentive. Cassandra’s expression cycles from reluctance to deep unease, and, by the end of Margo’s report, turns appalled. Varric keeps his face neutral, but it’s a cultivated kind of neutrality, a thin mask over something much grimmer. Solas’s eyebrows are knit together, his eyes stormy, dark, and focused on something beyond their immediate surroundings, as if he is peering into fate’s hidden mechanism and realizing the clockwork has a terminal flaw. If Varric’s fatalism runs deep beneath the surface, Margo notes, not for the first time, that Solas’s does not.

“Solas, tell me this is impossible.” Cassandra’s temper rises into her voice. “You have spent days caring for the Herald. Surely you would have noticed a brand. It is not a subtle thing. Or have you concealed this from us?”

Solas's gaze focuses on the warrior, his expression troubled. "No, Seeker. I noticed no such thing. Although I was admittedly distracted by my efforts to stabilize the mark before it killed the Herald."

"Seeker Pentaghast," Margo interjects before the warrior's anger sidetracks them further. "It is, in fact, a subtle thing. Evie wears her bangs over it, and she covers it with face powder. And the scar itself is faint. Only visible at a certain angle, and maybe even only in a certain light."

Cassandra sighs quietly, and pinches the bridge of her nose. "Very well. Let us suppose such a thing could be kept hidden. Solas. You are the mage. In your estimation, is the Herald, in fact, a Tranquil?"

The elf ponders his answer, but then he shakes his head firmly, once. "No. Her connection to the Fade is feeble, and..." His fingers flutter, as if trying to pluck the right expression from the air — or testing the texture of some invisible ligature. "Viscous. But it is no weaker than that of any arbitrary person's with no talent for magic — no different from an average warrior's, or farmer's. It is not severed. If it has been tampered with, the process was either incomplete, or else it did not bear fruit."

"Do we know Tranquility can't be reversed?" Varric scrapes at the stubble on his chin with a thoughtful glance at the seeker.

Cassandra shakes her head. "That should not be possible, no. It is a permanent procedure."

Varric's eyes narrow. "Is it? Remember Blondie, seeker?"

Cassandra winces before scowling at the dwarf in quick exasperation. "Yes, Varric, I am unlikely to forget the apostate who blew up the Kirkwall Chantry and was at the root of the mage rebellion. I also remember particularly well that he was one of your associates."

Varric makes another one of his "hold your horses" gestures before turning to Solas. "Not sure how much you know about the Kirkwall mess, Chuckles, but Blondie — Anders, that is — had a friend. Karl, his name was, as I recall. A close friend, from what I gathered, and a mage just like Blondie. Well, Karl was made Tranquil in the Kirkwall Circle — which, if you know anything about Kirkwall, shouldn't surprise you one bit."

Solas nods, seemingly in encouragement.

"Anyway, Blondie was... a bit of an unusual case, you might say. Though most of that was Justice, I guess. Drove him completely raving mad in the end, but that's not the point of this story. Point is, Hawke, Blondie, and I... we got into an altercation with some Templars, and Justice... came up. Glowing eyes, voice from the grave, the whole thing. Helped us escape the Templars, but that's not the point either. The point is that suddenly Karl reverted back to his old self. Emotions and all. It didn't last long, though, because as soon as he did, Karl asked Blondie to put him out of his misery."

"Your mage friend was possessed by a spirit of Justice?" Solas asks, eyebrows drawn in query.

"I don't think it was that simple, Chuckles. He was still Anders then. Mostly, anyway. And then, slowly, he changed. By the end of it, there wasn't much of him left in there, I don't think."

"Yes. Let it be clearly stated once and for all that the apostate was, in addition to everything else, an abomination, Varric." Cassandra shakes her head in disgusted consternation.

Margo frowns, processing. Apparently, temples in Thedas have the unfortunate tendency to blow

up. From what she can glean, there was some kind of plot involving one of Varric's former friends, which served as the trigger for the beginning of the Mages vs Templars conflict. Or one of the triggers, anyway. She wonders whether this Anders had done it as a deliberate provocation to escalate a long-festering tension.

Whatever drove the decision, the important part here is about the relationship between Anders and whatever "Justice" is. It doesn't help that the term "abomination" appears to refer to a whole range of different experiences, although all revolve around the entanglement between a human and a spirit. Margo wonders what such a relationship would be like, and, recalling the cosmic asshole, shudders.

But all of this feels tangential for the moment — there was an important argument Varric was trying to convey.

"Karl," she finally remembers, and waves her finger in the air. All eyes turn to her, and she clears her throat. Right. *Abominations, Karl!* All right. She can do this. She can have an intellectual meltdown later. "In the presence of Anders — his friend, this tranquil mage, you say he reverted to normal?"

Varric nods and gestures a "voila" with a theatrical flourish in Margo's general direction. "Not Anders, Prickly. Justice. When Justice took the reins, Karl got better."

"A spirit's presence in the waking world would make the Veil grow thin. In your friend's company the mage most likely found that he could touch the Fade, however briefly."

Solas's sing-song utterance has the effect of jolting Margo out of her cognitive muddle. "But once the spirit is no longer present, would the effect revert?"

Solas confirms this with a nod. "Yes, lethallan. A Tranquil mage is maimed beyond repair. Tranquility is no less permanent than an amputation."

Or a lobotomy, Margo thinks to herself. You might make a prosthesis for an amputation. She glances at Varric, who sports a slightly unfocused expression, as if he is trying to put together several parameters that have no particular desire to be combined.

"I do not mean to interrupt this discussion, but shall we return to the problem at hand? The Herald? Have we not established that she is not, in fact, Tranquil?" Cassandra drums her fingers on the table.

It's Margo's turn to shake her head. "Seeker, wait. Could a Rite of Tranquility be botched? Or... altered?" She taps her nail on the page of the alchemy manual. "There is something about Evie that is... unusual. I obviously cannot speak of the magic that is involved in this procedure, but Master Taigen's tome here describes the precursor stage of lyrium processing necessary for the operation, and it is quite complex." She is about to launch into a speculation of how the commodity chain of lyrium production would require for the mineral to be processed off-site, thus potentially decreasing standardization, but she cuts herself off abruptly. It is plausible that Maile might have wished to learn alchemy. It is considerably less likely that she would spew off a political analysis of the lyrium trade.

And still. She can hear the shift — it's not the words, exactly, it's how she delivered them, that old, habitual speech pattern that sounds too scholarly for the role she is playing. Sure enough, both Cassandra and Varric are giving her odd looks, and Solas's expression seems to contain a rather vehement warning.

“I have been meaning to ask you, agent. Are you, in fact, from Nevarra?”

Shit. Like watching a train careen off a bridge, while sitting in the last car. Margo swallows, trying frantically to think of a credible repair. “In your expert opinion, would the accent pass?” she asks.

Cassandra’s eyes widen in surprise. And then her expression changes, slowly, from suspicious to grudgingly impressed. “I... see.” She ponders the question. “It is not... bad. It is stable, which should help you. I would assume you from the southern regions of the country. Although perhaps not Cumberland. Your r-s are too soft, as if there is an Orlesian influence. It would not be uncommon for someone from the Fields of Ghislain, I suppose.”

Margo schools her face into a neutral expression before nodding sagely. Out of the corner of her eyes, she notices a minute shift to Solas’s posture, as if some of the tension releases him as well.

“Thank you, seeker. This identity is a work in progress.”

She gets a short nod.

Varric gives her a narrowed-eye look, but he doesn’t comment.

Solas motions with his hand. “I believe Margo wishes to draw our attention to the possibility that the procedure did not succeed. In your experience, Seeker Pentaghost, could such a thing occur?”

Cassandra’s scrutiny shifts to the elf, and Margo wrestles down the overwhelming desire to get up and kiss him. And, if she is to be honest with herself, not strictly in gratitude, either.

“There are records of the Rite not going as it should, but... Most of the time, this means that the mage does not survive.”

Varric frowns, the unfocused look resolving itself into alertness. “We’re missing an important detail, here. That brand — Prickly, you said it’s so faint you could barely see it? So, the question we really need to ask is *why*. Seeker, the forehead branding — it was common in Kirkwall. Do all Circles do this?”

Cassandra nods slowly. “I am not a specialist in these matters, but I suppose some scarring is likely inevitable. Of course, Knight Commander Meredith did not feel inclined to minimize it.”

“To mar the face in such a way is to claim ownership. No different than the markings of a slave.” The quiet gravitas of the statement draws Margo’s eyes towards the elf again. She is not alone. Varric cocks an eyebrow. Cassandra shifts in place, clearly uncomfortable. Solas’s face is still carefully neutral — that pleasantly polite expression, again — but something else roils beneath the sculpted mask. Some kind of ineluctable, almost cosmological wrath.

“A slave’s markings are meant to have an audience, Chuckles. What’s the point of making them so subtle you can barely see them?”

Cassandra nods. “Yes. Perhaps ... the agent is right. The procedure was aborted, and the scar remained incomplete.”

Margo stills because, finally, whatever had been brewing in the back of her skull about the oddity of Evie’s scar suddenly resolves itself into a clear image.

The scar isn’t incomplete. In fact, it is too careful. Too... perfect.

She’s pretty sure she turns momentarily slack-jawed under the impact of the insight.

Of course. She should have figured this out earlier. “Varric,” she says carefully. “You are a merchant, yes?”

The dwarf wrinkles his brow in puzzlement. “When I’m not being dragged around Thedas and interrogated, sure.”

“A merchant house would use insignia to help a customer identify its wares, would it not? To authenticate them?”

Varric nods, and then his expression drifts from puzzled to stunned to the sudden, blinding light of understanding. Margo looks at the other two, and they are in lock-step with the dwarf. Solas abruptly detaches himself from the wall and starts pacing. Cassandra’s hand drifts to the hilt of her sword, seeking its stability, Margo guesses.

“You’re saying the scar’s a kind of merchant’s mark, Prickly?” The question isn’t one. Varric already knows the answer.

Margo nods. It is. A brand in every sense. Including in her world’s typical usage of the term.

“It’s the most logical explanation, no?”

“But we do not yet know what it signals, if anything!” Cassandra tries to grasp at the last straws of sanity in the face of the monumental shift in worldview that Evie’s case seems to demand. “We do not know whether there is any connection at all between whatever was done to the Herald and her... luck bending problem. For all we know, the bad luck is the result of the mark on her hand!”

“And yet, we stand no chance of disaggregating these three issues without investigating further.” Solas pauses in his pacing and leans a shoulder against the bookshelf. “Unless we learn what happened to Evelyn Trevelyan, we are doing little more than stumbling blindly in the dark.”

Margo nods, briefly catching the elf’s gaze. There is a question there — a barely perceptible tilt to one eyebrow — which she interprets as a request for a private conversation sometime down the line. She inclines her head in a tiny nod.

“Shouldn’t we be asking why this was done in the first place?” Varric leans back in his chair. “We seem to be missing a crucial narrative ingredient. Motive.”

“This is true. But, for now, there is a more pressing matter.” Cassandra straightens, her jaw set at an angle that suggests she is entirely done with the hand wringing part of the exercise. “Yes. We must investigate. Vivienne, as I recall, is familiar with Ostwick. She may be a valuable resource, and I shall approach her. But we do not have the luxury of waiting before we make... accommodations. How wide is the radius of the Herald’s... effects?”

“Perhaps thirty feet?” the dwarf ventures. “Not sure. It seems to vary.”

Cassandra shakes her head again. “Whatever it is, it seems clear that the only viable route for closing the Breach is the Templars. We know that the Herald is capable of closing rifts. That is, in fact, one of the only signs of success we can claim so far. If the luck bending effect is magical in nature, then the Templars will hopefully suppress it too. Which brings us to the question of how to secure their allegiance. May I, agent?” Cassandra gestures at a free page in Margo’s journal. Margo nods. The warrior extracts the graphite stick from the journal’s binding and draws a quick, rough map of the Hinterlands. “I will speak to Leliana and Cullen. We must shift our strategy to a campaign, and away from a set of discrete and decentralized operations. Tomorrow, at first light, we will constitute separate units. We must coordinate troop movement such that we have a rotation

schedule. I do not want the Herald to be accompanied by the same team throughout. It is too exhausting and dangerous.”

Cassandra, settling into the role of military commander, suddenly seems entirely at ease. Margo looks at her other companions, and notices a small twinkle to Varric’s eyes, as if he’s actually appreciating the show.

“We know that a large contingent of Templars is camped out here” — an ‘X’ appears on the diagram — “and here. The mages are over on the other side of the refugee settlement. We will hit the two sides with parallel attacks, and dismantle the strongholds. We will then have the Herald move through the area as a... figurehead. All she will need to do is appear in the right place, and at the right time. We will also recruit aggressively while we’re there, and by the time Josephine is ready to wrangle the Orleasian nobility into helping us with getting an audience at Therinfal Redoubt, we will have something to show for ourselves.”

Varric leans forward, chin on his fists. He looks up at the Seeker. “The kid’s especially hard on the mages, Cassandra. We need to make sure they have enough breathing room.”

Cassandra nods. “Yes. The three of you. Report to me tomorrow morning, by morning chant at the absolute latest. I need someone who is ... aware of the problem in each patrol. In case things do not go as predicted.”

Everything about Cassandra’s plan seems reasonable. And yet, Margo cannot shake the nagging feeling that the solution, such as it is, is merely cosmetic.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by trebuchets and mysterious groups offering their services to certain select customers.

Next up: Fade visits from old friends

Interlude: Some Art!

Chapter Summary

RAGT, now with visual support!

Chapter Notes

I am super excited to announce that RAGT now features some visual support! This illustration, done by the amazing and multitalented @Chelbizarro corresponds to "Name your Poison" (Chapter 7) of RAGT v.1.

And as an extra bonus, Chel was kind enough to do a Q&A, linked below the image.



Please enjoy the sight of Imshael wearing his Solas suit. My absolute favorite part of this image is this: if you look *very* closely at the shadowed part of his silhouette, you will be able to tell that there's something... alarming about it (hint: Imshy wears that feathery shoulder pad mage armor in the game)

If you'd like to learn more about @Chelbizarro and her work, [check out the Q&A on Tumblr!](#)

Night Terrors

Chapter Summary

In which Margo receives a visitor of the demonic persuasion.

Chapter Notes

Ok, I'm not sure exactly to CW for this chapter, but please be aware that this deals with issues of grief, mourning, and the loss of a child. Nothing graphic, but it's a bit angsty. Also, as always with chapters that feature Imshael, if you're triggered by emotionally manipulative characters, please approach the writing accordingly. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They all agree to walk back separately. Cassandra leaves first, and Margo follows a few minutes after. Outside, the wind howls. Abrasive, dry prickles of snow are hurled horizontally in a wall of white noise so thick that Margo cannot see further than her outstretched hand. She stumbles back over a path entirely concealed by the white-out, trying to hide her face from the icy gale.

By the time she gets within the enclosure, Haven is more snowbank than village. Margo wades through knee-high snow on her way to the apothecary. She's not entirely sure she will actually make it there — her laborious stomping is accompanied by the distinct vision of falling into a particularly deep snowdrift and staying there as a frozen human-sized popsicle until the thaw, especially since the process is well underway: she can't feel her toes, and her fingers are turning into bluish claws. But she does make it to the door, even though it takes her several tries to crack the crust of ice layered over the hinges. Eventually, she manages to yank the door open.

She stumbles through the still-warm space, peeling layers of snow-encrusted armor and clothing as she goes. At least, she is alone — an unsurprising circumstance, since Adan is rarely around in the evenings. The fire in the chimney is little more than faintly glowing embers, but the masonry of the hearth still radiates pleasant warmth. She restacks the fire before climbing up to the rafters.

Another layer of damp clothing peeled off and left out to dry, and she collapses on her pallet. She is asleep within minutes.

The scent greets her first. Not a single scent, exactly, but an intermingling of smells: loam; pine resin; the heady, sweet aroma of something blooming — jasmine with the overlay of another, more subtle floral sweetness. Perhaps, moonflower. A warm breeze sweeps over her skin, soft and cloying with pheromonal seductions meant to lure in nocturnal insects. She knows where she is, of course, even before she opens her eyes, which is why she puts it off for as long as she possibly can. Until she sees it, it doesn't have to be real.

But then, the creeping sensation of being watched becomes too much. It turns out that she has company — though she knew that already, the second the dream began.

“Ah, ma da’elgar. Fancy meeting you here. Have you missed me? I was beginning to think that you were, perhaps, avoiding me.”

The thing that is not Solas awaits her on the edge of her daughter’s grave, sprawled on the little wooden bench that Jake had carved especially to fit within the wrought iron enclosure. Her brother had always channelled grief into his hands, and over the customary forty nine days of mourning, the bench had materialized, its shape emerging from the dark, hard wood of a bog oak. Austere, yet elegant. Atop its Fade equivalent, the demon stretches languidly, its lips curving in a familiar smile.

Margo stares at the doppelgänger. The feeling of violation at the fucking bastard invading this most intimate, sacred of spaces is so profound she’s not sure she can find words. “How dare you?” she finally asks, her tone flat.

The creature rocks back into a sitting position, and then it stands up, brushing dry pine needles off its tunic. “Such a *charming* place, my sweet poppet.” It tilts its head, something insectoid to the movement. “What a curious little thing you are. I will admit, I have been thoroughly enjoying these little...” it flicks its fingers and purses its lips... “‘nooks’ you’ve been building in the Fade. Such *richness*! Tragically wasted though it is.”

“You’re not welcome here. Leave.” Margo takes a step forward. She can feel her nails digging into her palms, but it’s a faraway sensation, a distant echo bouncing down the prism of pure, glacial fury.

“Is that any way to treat a guest?” It approaches, trampling the hyacinths under its feet, the soft, juicy crunch of breaking stems deafening in her ears. It steps over the low fence. “You know I could rip this memory from you and it would leave nary a trace?” it asks pleasantly. “Pluck it out like an irritating weed. Here, then gone.” It considers her with the elf’s borrowed mineral grey eyes. “Nothing left of her, or you. Any of you. Your precious matriline. Gone. So I highly recommend you practice being *polite*.”

“I will kill you,” Margo responds, somehow matching the demon’s conversational tone. She is at a point that lies so far beyond anger, so far off the axis of her ordinary emotional habits, that it is outside of her ability to fathom, or anticipate.

“Perhaps.” It smiles, though the expression is anything but jovial. “But I rather think not. In fact, I am of the opinion that, eventually, I will have you... ah... in a position where you are no longer so inclined to refuse my offers. But I can certainly wait.” It smiles. “*Until stars burn out, if you don’t make up your mind.* Your protests — entertaining though they are — just delay the inevitable.” It comes to stand in front of her, perhaps a foot away. Its physique is a perfect imitation — except something about it feels wrong, perversely out of joint. “Oh, but I see I’ve started off on the wrong foot, again, have I not? I am here with a proposal. Since you refuse my gifts, then how about a deal instead? I will make it fair.”

Margo stands her ground, though her skin prickles with revulsion. “There’s nothing you can offer me, thing. Leave.”

Its expression morphs from a kind of hard-edged, triumphant cruelty to gentle, heartbreaking tenderness in the blink of an eye. “And be deprived of the pleasure of your company? Tsk. Well. Do hear me out first, at least. What if I told you how to help your friends survive that terribly, unmercifully lucky leader of yours? Such *killer* luck, is it not? You wouldn’t want to lose anyone to it, would you now? Luck is finite, poppet. Terrible, when it runs out. What a delightful dilemma, don’t you find?”

It starts to circle her, and she moves with it, like a sunflower following the sun, not letting it come up behind her back.

“Perhaps next time, the dwarf’s crossbow will explode, some errant shard puncturing his throat before a healer can get to him. Four quarts is still a lot of blood, when it’s all out like that.” It pauses and licks its lips. Margo weathers a wave of sudden nausea. “Or the beautiful warrior could slip on a cobblestone and hit the bone over her temple at just the wrong angle — very soft, the bone there. One might even mistake it for slumber. How shall we call it — ah, yes, *sleeping beauty*. That should be familiar enough...” The thing’s eyes go out of focus, distant and trained on the outline of an invisible horizon. “Or that gallant Warden just might not dodge the blow in time.” It makes a sad little noise in the back of its throat. “Not all of us are meant to keep our heads, hmm?”

It comes to stand in front of her again and raises its hands, as if to cup her face. Margo recoils.

“Ah, but do not let me forget. Your wolf! Yes.” The thing that isn’t Solas shakes its head. “Have you seen red lyrium yet, heartling? No? You will. Not meant to protrude from one’s chest like that, is it? Makes all sorts of unmentionable things leak out, every which way. Doesn’t make for a pretty corpse — not peaceful at all, all that seepage. And no matter what else you are, you are all, still, such fragile little vessels, are you not?”

“You can take your prophecies and stuff them up your immaterial rectum,” Margo grinds out between her teeth.

The thing claps its hands and laughs — a merry, warm sound. “Oh, I do so like you, little spirit. Such fire! But you’re not listening. I offer you a simple solution. I can tell you how to prevent all that from happening. What’s a little knowledge traded between friends?” It slithers up to her again. “And is a kiss truly such a high price to pay? Are you so selfish that you would deny your comrades their best chance at survival just because you don’t find me *exactly* to your liking?”

“Yes.” Margo tells it. “Fuck off.”

“Ah.” It tips its head to the side, observing her with alien curiosity. “Did I don the wrong mask? Is that it? Would... this one suit you better?”

Of all the faces he could wear, he chooses Ivan. Ivan, with his cornflower blue eyes and Slavic cheekbones, Ivan who could never grow a proper beard even by twenty. She’d teased him mercilessly about it when they were teenagers. Ivan, whose face had faded from her memory to an abstract placeholder until the demon replicates it. This is not *her* Ivan, of course — and not the one who left her with a dead child and a broken heart. This Ivan is a decade older, with salt at his temples, his face gaunt and angular as if life had taken him on a hard ride since she saw him last. This Ivan’s eyes are haunted the way her Ivan’s never were — regret and longing mingling together.

Margo inches back, and then forces herself to hold her ground. “I find your cruelty deeply unoriginal.” For a few moments, she feels almost pleased with herself.

The creature stalks closer, and then, suddenly, the dislocation of its mask dissolves, and she is staring at her former husband, as intimately familiar as her own face in the mirror — the one she lost to her transplantation.

“Rita, I’m sorry,” Ivan says. “I’m so sorry, *draga*.” He cups her face. Margo flinches. She struggles against a sudden feeling of inevitability — the nightmare pulsing with its own inexorable unfolding. She knows exactly what is to come, how it would play out. The sudden memory overtakes her, sucking her under its tide. He smells exactly as he used to, of machine oil and basil

aftershave and just a little bit of sweat, when he would come home after working on Uncle Janos's ever breaking Lada. A true piece of shit, that car was. The kiss, when it comes, will be gentle and soft — and achingly familiar. Ivan always smiled into his kisses. His hand will snake into her hair, cupping the back of her head. His other palm will rest against her cheek, the calluses a sharp contrast to the soft way his thumb will trace the corner of her lips. He will brush his lips against hers, and then he will deepen the kiss, and his hands will trail down her neck, pushing the chemise down off one shoulder, then the other. The fabric will pool at her feet. He will step back then, his eyes glittering with a kind of stunned appreciation — as if, even after all those years, he is still surprised by the sight of her bare skin. She will undo his belt — and, inevitably, it will get caught because the buckle is broken, and he never bothered to fix it. She'll push him down on their old, lumpy mattress and he'll come down hard, laughing, and pull her on top of him at the last moment, just when she thought she won the upper hand. They're silly. They're always silly. She'll whack him with a pillow, and he'll confiscate it eventually, throwing it across the room, but she will retaliate by attempting to tickle him, despite his claims to being immune. He'll pin her beneath him and restrain her wrists with his large, calloused palm. She'll pretend to struggle, laughter bubbling up to the surface, until he trails kisses down her belly, and then — a flash of cornflower blue, mirth dancing in his eyes — and he will put his mouth on her, and he knows her by heart, by rote, every little twitch and moan and shudder, even in the worst of it, even when the contours of their broken future already loom on the horizon... But here, in this moment, before Lily, they are still so achingly young...

Margo stumbles back, and the compulsion of the memory shatters, releasing her from its trajectory. She breathes out a shaky sigh. "Nice try, shitgibbon, better luck next time. At least don't insult my intelligence."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Imshael comments in Ivan's voice, his tone perversely, heart-wrenchingly gentle. "If I were intent on duping you, poppet, do you truly believe you would know it? Do not insult *my* intelligence. This was an offer — one gift I *could* give you. No strings attached."

Margo barks a laugh. "The gift that keeps on giving, huh? What part of 'fuck off' requires explaining?"

It contemplates her with a wry glint in its stolen eyes. "Ah, but *I am* learning. For example..."

It's fast. Before Margo can blink, it shrinks in size, limbs shortening and filling out, skin darkening to a rich olive tone, a shade lighter than her own. Hair sprouts from its head, until the skull is hidden behind a corona of curly ringlets, a deep chestnut brown. Its features distort and miniaturize — a button nose, a little bow of a mouth, and large grey eyes ringed with long eyelashes.

Margo looks down in utter, soul-sucking terror.

Lily — because, of course, it is her — never did look like this. Here she is about three, over half a year past the time when the illness ate her alive. She is glowing and healthy, chubby and dimpled like the world's most huggable rubber ball. She is wearing the dress that Baba had knitted for her last journey — bright yellow, with big red poppy flowers. Two ponytails stick out like little curly antennae, on each side of her head. She's right at that cusp between toddlerhood and childhood, where the outline of the little girl she will become shines through the still babyish features.

"Mama?" Lily says, a bright sound, like silver bells, and then her chin begins to tremble, the shock of mom suddenly reappearing after a long absence. "Mama... Mama!"

Margo feels her legs buckle under her, and she falls on her knees, onto the lush grass, suddenly eye-level with her daughter. Lily extends her chubby little arms — in the last year of life, she

never did have those sweet dimples at the elbows, because she could never keep on the weight. Big fat tears creep slowly down her round cheeks. “Mama I miss you,” she wails. “Hug!” She doesn’t quite pronounce her ‘h-s’ yet.

Lily, of course, never spoke English — the sound is a translation. The realization is the only thing that keeps Margo from throwing her arms around the beloved nightmare. “Oh my baby,” she sobs instead. Still, it takes everything she’s got — everything she’s ever had — not to scoop up her daughter in her arms.

Because, of course, it isn’t her daughter.

She digs her fingers into the earth, the scream inside her gathering power.

“Mama?” Lily whimpers, big round eyes growing foggy with hurt and fear. “Mama, are you mad? I’m sorry, mama, I won’t do it again...”

“No, bunny. *I’m* so sorry. You’re gone. This isn’t you.”

Margo feels the tears roll down her cheeks, but they seem like the least relevant thing in the world at that moment. In the end, she doesn’t quite know what she does, except something inside her shifts, fractures, and then rearranges itself into a new, sore, and profoundly other configuration.

The moonflower vine that climbs the scaly reddish pines moves and slithers towards her. The delicate flowers, like alien eyes, rotate slowly on their axial stems in the cloying, perfumed darkness. The grass under Lily’s feet shudders and bends, tiny prehensile hairs. The scent of jasmine thickens to something you could choke on. It all pulses under her skin, verdant, vegetative, perversely aware, the Fade responding to an articulation of her consciousness, old as her own sense of self, and likely older, as old as Baba — or whoever (or whatever) came before her. The thing that pulses through the archaic roots of the matriline.

“Go back to sleep, my love,” Margo tells the apparition, because thinking of her as a mere mask would break her.

The vines twine around Lily’s little legs and arms and lift her up, gently, over the enclosure, swaying and rocking her towards the grave. The earth under the trampled hyacinths turns soft and loamy.

“Mama, no! Please!” A desperate sob. “Mama, mama, it’s dark in there!” The child breaks into an anguished wail. “There’s monsters!”

Margo covers her ears with her hands, shuts her eyes tight, though she does not need to see to animate the plants — the Fade is all too happy to anticipate her wishes. She’s pretty sure she’s screaming through all of this, but the knowledge is hypothetical. Later, when she tries to describe the events to Solas, she will break down into hysterical, hiccuppy sobs because there are absolutely no words in any language to capture the feeling of dragging your own daughter’s struggling body into the soft earth of an upturned grave.

And then, at length, it’s over, and Margo releases the fabric of the memory, allowing for the flora to settle back into passivity. She opens her eyes.

The thing that is not Solas is sitting on the bench. The hyacinths on the grave are undisturbed.

The creature beams at her. “What a rare find you are, my sweet morsel! I just *knew* there was something interesting about you.”

Slowly, Margo straightens. “This is not yours. This will never be yours. Fuck. Off,” she whispers, and then, drawing on whatever fractured jagged thing that now snags at her insides, pulls the membrane of the memory into herself, and past the incorporeal body of the demon. Like trying to pull a rug from under someone’s feet. The effort of it is monumental — like shifting an entire system of coordinates from beneath the universe it structures.

There’s a momentary expression of surprise to the mask the thing wears, and then the cosmic asshole vanishes, like the bad dream he is.

Margo opens her eyes and leans off the straw pallet, just in time to vomit a thin stream of bile, mixed with clumps of half-coagulated blood.

She gets up, and then almost collapses back onto the floor. Gets up again — gingerly, this time — and leans her forehead against a roof beam until the world stops spinning. Slowly, meticulously, she makes her way down the ladder, trying not to slip and break her neck in the process — though, based on the general state of affairs, that might actually be a mercy.

Back on the ground floor, she unstoppers an elfroot potion and downs the contents in several long gulps. The nausea passes slowly, as if the efficacy of the draught is diminished by her body’s unwillingness to absorb it. Unless, of course, it is not her *body* that suffered whatever damage the Cosmic Asshole inflicted.

After about five minutes of sitting at the desk and mindlessly digging out bits of pulverized insect from the cracks in the wood — Master Adan did leave a spectacular mess — she feels solid enough to go clean up the mess upstairs.

Outside, it’s still pitch black. She’s awake in the dead of night, yet again, but at least the snow has stopped, and she can see unfamiliar clusters of stars through the window. The room is dark enough for their wan light to filter through the pane of mica glass.

She’s Ok. If she doesn’t think about it. She’s fine.

Margo downs another potion, vaguely registering that she in a state of general undress, the air cool against her bare legs beneath the long linen shirt, but the thought of fussing with the wrappings and the armor feels like the equivalent of trying to ascend Mount Everest skipping on one foot the whole way up. Still. She uses the dried, frayed stem of a vandal aria to clean her teeth and mouth of the foulness. She opens the door, almost relishing the slap of bracingly cold air. She gathers a handful of snow. She shuts the door and uses the snow to wash her face.

See? Fine.

The night is bright and silent. She’s so busy actively ignoring whatever is happening inside her head, that her focus, now directed entirely to the outside world, snags on an unfamiliar object she had somehow overlooked earlier. A bottle of some kind of amber liquid rests in the courier basket by the door. Margo picks up the folded note that accompanies it.

“To Apprentice Alchemist Margo, Agent of the Inquisition.”

She breaks the waxy seal.

“Dear Agent,

I believe you were sent to us by the Maker himself. Our digestively challenged guests are reporting

that their levels of discomfort are much lessened already, thanks to your efforts. I am including a small token of my gratitude. It is Antivan — not the best year for that vintage, but far above average.

With appreciation,

~Lady J. Montilyet, Ambassador.

PS: If you have a moment tomorrow, I wish to request a short consultation regarding another matter. I would be in your debt.”

Margo folds the letter and places it on the desk.

And then she considers the bottle, still in the basket.

She could just drink it. Why not? Is there, in fact, a good reason not to?

She’s not sure how much time passes. In the end, the only thing that stops her from chugging back the liquor is the knock on the door.

Margo gets up without really thinking about who might be visiting the apothecary in the dead of night in the middle of a monumental snow storm, and she flings the door open. A frigid gust of wind covers her skin in goosebumps.

Somehow, she is entirely not surprised to discover Solas waiting on her doorstep.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Imshael, who is a trope-savvy villain. In fact, he sometimes wears different persona and parachutes Easter eggs into his diatribes. Today's less recognizable citation is from a pretty terrible 1990s movie called *The Prophecy*, featuring Christopher Walken. See if you can spot the quote ;)

Next up: Philosophical smut? Smutty philosophy? Definitely gratuitous applications of Descartes, with apologies to poor René.

Comments and concrit always welcome. Thank you for your reading eyes.

Deus Ex Machina (*)

Chapter Summary

In which Margo and Solas discuss Cartesian dualism, and get a bit carried away. (On the NSFW side of the equation, please read accordingly)

Chapter Notes

One more quick update before RL buries me under another pile of work.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Margo steps aside, gestures for Solas to come in, and shuts the door behind him.

She doesn't meet the elf's gaze. Instead, she fixes her eyes on the wall, which, aside from a thick crust of alchemical grime and Adan's incomprehensible scribbles, has exceptionally little to recommend it.

"Ma da'nas, what happened?"

Turning to look at him requires the kind of bracing effort that setting a dislocated limb would. On the count of three...

In the end, she does it, the breath rushing out through her teeth in a soft hiss. And then it really is just Solas. Traces of recent sleep linger in his rumpled clothing and in the reddish imprint on one cheek.

"I felt a strange disturbance in the Fade. I sought you out, but could not find you."

He looks her over, frowning in puzzlement. His expression morphs as he realizes what she is wearing. He colors. Slightly at first, and then quite a bit more noticeably. His frown deepens, edging away from slightly embarrassed discomfiture to concern.

"You'll have to excuse the appearance. I wasn't expecting company." There. That sounds like a completely reasonable statement, given the circumstances.

His eyes take her in one more time, and then he regroups and focuses on her face. "Tell me what occurred," he urges softly.

Margo's attention returns to the wall. She feels trapped and therefore vaguely resentful. She was fine. This did not need to be dealt with immediately. Or ever. If she just ignores it...

"Margo."

Her name on his lips hooks her like a summoning. It also jolts her out of the dissociative state, and slams her right back into the here and now — a change for which she feels no gratitude whatsoever. But ostrich politics never gets anyone anything other than a mouthful of sand, so

Margo does the next most logical thing under the circumstances. She pads, barefoot, to the shelf that contains the glass beakers. Selects two that could, if one squints, pass for whiskey glasses. And then she returns and hands one to the elf.

“I will explain, but I need an analgesic. However, I would rather not drink alone, and since you’re here, would you...?” she waves her hand at the bottle of Antivan stuff in the basket by the door.

To his credit, Solas not only takes this new development in stride, but does so with flair. He plucks her glass from her hands and sets both on the desk, then he examines the contents of the courier basket, lifts the bottle, and extracts the cork with a quick flutter of fingers and a wave of ozone — changing the internal pressure to push the cork out, she guesses. He lights one of the larger candles on the workstation, and the room is bathed in a soft, warm glow. And then he pours two equal measures of the amber liquid — which, to Margo’s surprise, fills the air with the scent of an expensive Madeira — into the questionable glassware.

“Sit, if you would.” It doesn’t sound like much of a request at all. She complies. Solas hands her the drink before settling in the chair opposite hers, with his own glass balanced in his hands.

“To whose benefit shall we toast today?” the elf asks, and while there is a trace of irony in his voice, his expressions remains grave.

“May all living beings benefit,” Margo offers formally, if rather dryly. She leans forward and clinks her glass against his.

“An overly generous proposition.” He takes a small sip. His eyebrows shoot up in a mild surprise and he hums appreciatively. Margo sticks her nose into her own beaker, inhales, and brings the liquid to her lips. It is rich, smooth, and delicious — a floral sweetness with a hint of tartness in the aftertaste.

“Tell me what occurred.”

She leans back in her chair and briefly considers her general state of undress. Well, at least she did bother with underwear, so there is that. She crosses her legs — no dignified way of pulling this off in a tunic that doesn’t extend past her upper thighs, but she makes do — and she proceeds to tell her second nocturnal visitor about the first one.

Eventually, as the story unfolds, her detached façade begins to crack. And then, finally, when she gets to Lily, it all comes crashing down. When she finds herself racked with angry sobs, Solas gets to his feet, but before he can make his way over to her, Margo meets his gaze and shakes her head once.

“I can’t outsource this to you, but...” she trails off. “I appreciate...” The rest doesn’t quite come out.

“I understand.” He settles back into his seat.

At length the tears run dry, and somehow, with Solas as her silent, patient witness, the ruptured thing inside begins to mend a little. Margo wipes at her cheeks and finishes her story.

Solas remains silent for a long time. They sit, motionless, and Margo allows her gaze to come unmoored, the leaden stupor of emotional exhaustion settling over her like a heavy shawl.

“It appears that the Forbidden One is escalating his overtures.” Beneath his placid tone, the echoes of some other emotion Margo cannot begin to unpack. “But we suspected this would happen. When did he visit you last?”

Margo thinks back to the Avvar prison. Right. She never did tell him about that. “Not since the Avvar keep.”

“You did not mention this to me,” he observes, again with that oh-so-careful neutrality.

“I did not. Amund — the Avvar ritual specialist — interrupted the dream. He told me that I needed to stop... inviting Imshael.” There is a brief flare of banked anger in Solas’s gaze, and Margo averts her eyes. “I had thought that there was, in fact, a chance that I was bringing this on myself.”

He shifts in his chair. “No more than a brightly colored fruit is deliberately tempting you to eat it, but even so, you should have spoken to me of this.”

She cuts him an arch glance. “Do I look like a brightly colored fruit to you?” Her tone notwithstanding, she finds herself partly curious whether there is something about her presence in the Fade — aside from the mismatch between body and spirit Solas had mentioned before — that might be helping Imshael latch onto her.

“At the moment?” A trace of wry amusement flashes beneath the overlay of concern and discomfort. His eyes flicker over her naked legs, and Margo half expects his next line to be some innuendo-laden jape. But he surprises her. “Nothing quite so common,” he sighs quietly.

It’s definitely not just the warm and fuzzies this time, and Margo takes up the task of carefully examining an entirely uninteresting knot in the floorboard under her feet. Still, she is grateful for the distraction.

When she meets his eyes again, Solas’s expression is grim.

“The symptoms you described following your dream suggest some lingering damage. We must consider the possibility that your visitor is feeding on you.” His lips press into a hard line.

Margo’s stomach knots with dread. She winces, but then she manages to rally whatever passes for her intellectual capacity these days. Right. Keep it abstract. “So demons feed on people.” A bitter chuckle escapes her. “No wonder the Chantry disapproves.”

Solas lifts a shoulder in a shrug and tilts his head to the side, a strange intransigence settling over his features. “Some do, certainly. As to the Chantry’s doctrine on the subject matter... Would you pass judgement on a wolf or a bird of prey for seeking sustenance in accordance with its nature? Even a druffalo depends on grazing in a pasture. Whatever life a plant might lead, it is life nonetheless, and yet I see no tears shed over its termination.”

Margo raises a skeptical eyebrow. “Why do I have the distinct impression that we’re back to the fruit metaphor again?”

The elf leans back in his chair and takes a sip from his glass. “It is prudent to approach the Fade and its denizens with clarity and without undue hubris, letha'laim. Plenty of spirits have little interest in the affairs of mortals. But the Fade is a complex world — no less complex or dangerous than its waking counterpart, and, arguably, more so.”

Margo tries to smother the flare of irritation, and fails. “I didn’t exactly ask for any of this, Solas.”

“You most certainly did not. But here you are regardless of intention, and I would not do you the disservice of dangerous coddling disguised as empty reassurances.”

She chuckles, abstractly amused at the parallelism. Had she not thought the very same thing about him when the accursed memory ritual entangled them into... whatever this is? “Fair enough.

Where I come from, we think of ourselves as the apex predator. This is going to take a bit of adjustment.”

He remains silent.

Margo takes a breath, releasing it slowly. The world is all that is the case. Raging against it is going to accomplish absolutely nothing. “So, let me see if I can get the mechanics straight, at least. Imshael’s gambits have to do with choice, correct? So it’s still getting me to make choices — even if it’s not the choices it claims it wants.” She looks up at her companion, the full horror of the situation suddenly coming into sharp focus. She congratulates herself on her steady tone. An academic conundrum. Keep it theoretical. “If so, then I presume it’s just distracting me with the illusion of a preferred choice. Is it possible that the mere act of choosing — however one does — would be enough for it to feed?” Her eyes go wide with the sudden insight. “So the second it makes an offer...”

Solas nods, with a trace of reluctance. “It is possible. It is an ancient spirit, and it had ample opportunity to elaborate its approach — it would not have survived for as long as it has if it were not versatile. Though you managed to gain an advantage over it in your last encounter, I doubt it will relinquish its claim on you easily.” His expression softens. “I... I wish that I could offer you more tangible succor than whatever weapons clearer understanding lends, but I fear such interventions would not be the wisest course of action in the long run.”

Margo sighs. “Tough love approach, huh?” She waves his protest away. “I wasn’t asking for a crutch.”

“Nor did I expect that you would.”

She returns to the stimulating task of staring at the floor, because the next logical question is not one she is ready to face herself — let alone, with someone else present. Not even him. Especially not him. “Could its prophesying be true?” she finally asks, her voice carefully modulated. “If the situation I’m in is a double bind anyway — as in, fuck if you do, and fuck if you don’t — then the most strategically logical option, in the grand scheme of things, might be to cut a deal.” She swallows. “All living beings benefiting, and all that.”

Solas does not respond for a long time, and as the silence stretches, Margo closes her eyes, for fear that this will culminate in exactly the kind of answer she’s afraid she must face.

When she looks up again, two things have shifted. Solas is no longer in his seat, and her glass has been refilled.

She finds the elf crouching at her feet, his hands resting on the armrests of her chair. She never heard him move. His forearms bracket her bare legs. “Absolutely not.” He lifts his gaze to hers, his eyes aglow with some arcane emotion. “I...” Judging by his expression, he’s looking for words to convey just how much the idea does not appeal, but he is coming up profoundly short. “The price it would exact would not justify whatever protection it promises, nor would it match in value whatever knowledge it purports to share.” His tone is suspiciously even.

Did Baba not have similar words of wisdom to offer? Margo meets her companion’s gaze. “Considering what we’re beginning to learn about Evie, Cosmic Shitgibbon is not entirely wrong. About the luck thing, anyway. I cannot shake the feeling that we have little recourse as it is.” She sighs. “And that we’re running out of time and options.”

“We would certainly do well to discover the causes behind the Herald’s peculiar predicament, as well as gain a better understanding of its potential consequences.”

Margo narrows her eyes, an errant thought niggling at the back of her mind. “You called Imshael ‘The Forbidden One.’ Forbidden by whom? Or to whom?”

Solas stands up with uncharacteristic brusqueness, picks up his brandy from the desk, and starts pacing. “That is an old tale, ma’nas. I would be happy to share with you what I recall of it. But not tonight.” She notices his omission of the diminutive prefix in the endearment, and at the switch in meaning that this implies her heart does a painful little skip. Between “little soul” as a referent for her strange predicament, and the rather more intimate claim entailed in “ma’nas” — my soul — the contrast suddenly feels momentous. Before she can get lost in semantics, he continues. “There is always too little time. But in this interval left to us, at least for now, I would rather have you ponder more pleasant things. This matter of your visitor will have to be addressed, and soon. But for the moment... the next few days may prove harrowing enough.” He pauses before turning to her. “If you are not intent on sleep, would you speak to me a little of your world? It is not over wine, certainly, but perhaps an adequate alternative?”

Margo looks at him incredulously, and then she finds herself smiling, despite everything. “What would you like to know?”

About half-an-hour from there, and of all the paths they might have traveled, a heated debate over Descartes is not one she would have anticipated. She’s not even entirely sure why they ended up with that particular topic in the first place, but his questions queried her over her world’s influential philosophical traditions, while she kept returning to the problem of spirits and bodies — and Descartes seemed like one possible triangulation of the two problems.

Solas seems to have remarkably few issues with the whole “*Cogito ergo sum*” assertion. And whatever it is about her explanation of Cartesian dualism and its critiques, it rubs the elf the wrong way.

“Do I understand correctly that your world has no equivalent of the Fade? Would such polemics not be little more than intellectual abstractions, given the circumstances?”

“Comparatively speaking, my world’s disenchantment is a relatively recent framework. Much of the philosophy I mentioned is rooted in theism. In this, it’s not that different from Thedas and what the Chantry teaches, if I understand your concept of the Maker correctly. Of course, it might be a false equivalence, I’d have to dig into your theology...”

The conversation meanders. He adopts a crassly pragmatist position, along the lines of “well, there *are* spirits, and there *are* material bodies” — motioning at her by way of evidence. A small smile tugs at the corner of his lips, which makes Margo suspect that the elf has elected a deliberately spurious line of argument, and it annoys her enough that she starts throwing French phenomenology at him. She could have gone to Buddhism for the non-dualist route, but she’s rustier on it. He listens carefully, with a fetching little smile, and then proceeds to poke holes in her discussion of intersubjectivity. “Elegant, but static, and yet entirely too vague.”

He keeps her on her toes, and, absorbed by the sheer pleasure of their discursive fencing, Margo almost forgets the night’s earlier events by the time she finishes her second glass of Antivan stuff. The brew is deceptively strong.

In response to a particularly egregious and convoluted counterargument, Margo accuses Solas of sophistry. And then, at his quirked eyebrow, she finds herself explaining the term. Solas’s expression flashes with recognition before turning momentarily incensed. He narrows his eyes and parries with his own counter-accusation regarding her debating techniques. It’s a short string of Elvhen with lots of glottal stops that, after she quizzes him about the expression’s meaning, Solas translates as “a deliberate error in logic espoused for the purpose of pushing your opponent to

adopt an untenable claim.”

He is leaning back in his seat, in that radical dissident pose he is coming to adopt more and more frequently in her company.

“Stop the reductions to absurdity, and I’ll stop... repeat that term to me again?” She purses her lips and waits for the next snooty accusation of deductive fallacy.

“Kiss me,” he suddenly requests, his voice quiet and a little hoarse.

It shoots through her like a jolt of electricity. “That is not a valid argument,” Margo notes cautiously.

“But a perfectly valid proposition.” He fails to break eye contact.

Oh, it’s like that, is it?

It is probably the drink, or perhaps the emotional stress, but Margo finds herself standing up and bridging the distance to his chair. Solas tilts his head back to look at her. After a few seconds of deliberation, she straddles his thighs and lowers herself into his lap.

And, to be fair, this is not quite what the elf had bargained for. She watches his pupils dilate, his lips parting on an involuntary “oh.” He hesitates, suddenly uncertain about what to do with himself, and then he brings his hands to her hips, the touch cool through the thin fabric of the linen tunic.

Margo cups his face, her thumbs tracing the contour of his cheekbones. She leans in, halting a fraction of an inch away from meeting his lips. His breath ghosts across her skin. She shifts to a more comfortable position — a maneuver met with a soft and rather vexed groan.

“Be careful what you wish for, yes?”

The provocation engenders retaliation. His hands slide down and travel beneath the hem of her shirt before beginning a slow, meticulous exploration, trailing up her thighs and then further up, following the lines of her waist. “An excellent point, in retrospect, given that you are wearing rather fewer clothes than usual.” He sounds a tad strained. “It seems hardly equitable.”

“Is that a complaint?” Margo asks.

His return smirk is cheeky, but his eyes on her are pure heat. Nothing playful about it. “No.” He pauses. “And yes.”

“Ambivalent.”

He chuckles. His hands glide over her ribs, his fingertips tracing the ridge of one of her body’s multiple scars. And then they travel a little higher.

“What are you doing?” Margo squeaks, vaguely surprised that linguistic capacity hasn’t shut down yet.

“Merely deciding how to resolve the ambivalence. Would you have me stop?”

“No, but I suspect that ‘resolving the ambivalence’ has a rather teleologically predetermined outcome.” Vaguely, as if through a fog, Margo considers the likely absence of Greek influences in Common, as it pertains to the concept of teleology. The thought, such as it is, is a distant sort of thing — flickering out there in the haze. “A predetermined result,” she supplies belatedly.

Another quiet chortle, and then his exploration changes course. His palms venture down and come to rest over the curve of her ass. He pulls her forward slightly and readjusts them such that they fit together somewhat less uncomfortably. A little moan escapes her — if there were any doubts about the teleological trajectory of their discussion, this certainly resolves them, and rather firmly at that.

“It is my understanding that Ancient Elvhen had the opposite concept,” Solas reflects, and if his voice seems perfectly serene once again, Margo is not fooled. Her hands rest against the sides of his neck and his pulse is frantic beneath her fingers. He utters a complicated phonetic sequence she doesn’t even attempt to reproduce.

“Meaning?”

His eyes crinkle with sharp humor. “An eventuality delayed indefinitely on account of its inevitability.”

Margo tries to process this — it takes her longer than it normally would, since she is working with a handicap — but, eventually, she shakes her head in condemnation. “Did ancient elves have inordinately long life-spans? Only a people who don’t worry about mortality would come up with such a thoroughly perverse idea.”

His quiet chortle sends tingling tendrils down her spine, and his hands begin their exploratory journey again. The insight skips away. “You have yet to kiss me,” he remarks, his eyes on her lips. “Must I beg?”

“That’s a thought.” She leans a little closer. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to, by the way.”

“And what am I ‘up to’?”

She meets his gaze. “You’re distracting me. But mostly, you’re reclaiming Imshaels’ request as your own. Sometimes I suspect that your secret agendas have secret agendas. But I’m on to you...”

Before she can elaborate further, Margo sucks in a breath and arches against him, because the elf’s itinerant fingers, which have resumed their upward climb, are trailing along a particularly sensitive stretch of skin right above her solar plexus. His palm settles there against her heart, no doubt picking up on its frenzied fluttering. His other hand, at the small of her back, locks her in place.

Judging by his body’s reaction, she is not alone in her general state of unfulfilled anticipation, so at least there’s that. “Oh, very well,” he breathes out. It comes out as a whisper, rough and a little uneven. “*Please*, ma’nas. Kiss me.”

His words transmute into searing heat, and Margo feels her body turn soft and pliant in response. Before she loses all capacity for intentionally directed action, she rocks forward, obliging his request.

He lets her set the pace, so she can feel, viscerally, the moment when his control begins to fray. If the elf had any compunctions about where his hands should or should not travel, by mid-kiss they are discarded. Margo moans helplessly against his mouth, because inhabiting a form one did not spend a lifetime domesticating apparently signifies that when his hands finally cup her breasts, the touch feels unprecedented to the point of mild shock.

He breaks away and stares at her with that strange, slightly tortured frown of his that mixes, in equal proportions, desire and astonishment. And then he shakes it off in favor of trailing a line of sharp little nips along her jaw.

Margo's hands set off on their own excursion by this point, and, before long, she is trying to figure out how to extract him out of his accursed sweater. The task appears more logistically taxing than it has any right to be, which brings her to the only logical conclusion that turtlenecks are morally reprehensible, and should be banned.

"Bed?" he whispers against her neck. He grazes the sensitive skin over the pulse point beneath her ear, earning himself a quiet gasp. "Desk?" His thumbs trace the underside of her breasts. A quiet groan escapes him. "Floor? Wall?" Another soft bite.

Margo tries to swallow back the moan, but it's no use. "What's wrong with the chair?" she manages. Because why travel far?

"The window concerns me." One hand returns to her hip before sliding over her abdomen. He undoes the string that holds her undergarments in place with a firm tug, and his fingers set forth towards new discoveries.

By that point, Margo is no longer above begging either. She leans to the side — which has the effect of granting him quite a bit more access, an opportunity which he immediately exploits — and she blows out the single candle. She settles back into his lap, navigating by feel in the sudden darkness. "I take it you've resolved the ambivalence."

"I suppose I have." She can feel his lips curving into a smile against her ear. "You are overdressed."

"Then I propose you take it upon yourself to remedy this oversight," Margo suggests in the most formal tone she can muster under the circumstances. His laughter, warm and low and a little breathless sends a shudder through her. She reaches down between them, and his chortling turns into a strangled growl.

"You have me at a disadvantage." He manages to keep his voice commendably even, though his hips jerk beneath her, arching him into her touch.

"Is that your way of saying you'd rather be on top?"

His grip on her hips tightens and he draws in a ragged breath. "Not expressly, though I would be happy to accommodate, if that is your wish."

Whatever part of Margo's mind is in charge of fatalism, it has somehow managed to internalize the idea that whatever hypothetical deity might be in charge of Thedas, it is a faithful acolyte of Murphy's Law. And thus, when in the next instant a tentative knock resonates at the door, she's not, in fact, surprised at all.

They both freeze, but her next impulse — to flee upstairs and frantically try to get herself presentable — is interrupted in its tracks. The elf locks her firmly against him, and then his lips find her ear.

"Hush," he says. "They may yet leave."

They remain still for a few moments. When a second knock doesn't follow, Solas, apparently not content to let time go to waste, grazes the shell of her ear with his teeth. Margo squirms against him — and is rewarded by a mildly indignant little *hmpf*.

There's a loud, clanking thud outside — not so much an intentional knock, as the sound of something large, heavy, and quite possibly armored collapsing against the door.

Margo freezes. Solas lets out a resigned sigh and motions at the candle. In the next instant, the wick flares to life. Margo squints against the sudden glare. They look at each other.

“I think the Deus Ex Machina just broke down.” At the elf’s drawn eyebrows and disgruntled look, Margo dissolves into a fit of barely contained chortles. “I promise I’ll explain. You might even enjoy the irony. Probably at a later time, though.”

He narrows his eyes at her in mock accusation, his expression rueful, abstractly amused, a little worried, and utterly frustrated all at once. “Kiss me one more time, ma’nas. And then you will get back into your clothes and we will see who is in such desperate need of an alchemist at this hour that they are willing to sleep on your doorstep in the snow.” His lips quirk. “And I will strive not to resolve their difficulties rather more permanently,” he adds with alarming cheerfulness.

Margo nods, still stifling the giggles. She has the firm intention of making the kiss perfectly chaste — but... well. When she breaks away, Solas gives her a wounded look. “Fenor, have mercy. I am not made of stone. Unless you do wish for us to ignore your third visitor of the evening, which I would happily advocate for if you believe my arguments will sway you.”

“With our luck?” Margo shakes her head regretfully and plants a kiss on the tip of his nose. “It’s probably a matter of life or death. I don’t believe ignoring is an option.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Descartes, and my musings about how Ancient Elvhen might have dealt with the concept of "slow burn." :-P

Next up: Repairing the Deus Ex Machina (also known as Cullen needs to take better care of himself)

Ball and Chain

Chapter Summary

In which Margo learns that lyrium is bad for you.

Chapter Notes

CW: references to drug use

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Margo's glib prediction about life and death turns out perversely prophetic.

Something swirls, restless, at the back of her mind. Hard to say what, exactly, but the scientifically rigorous term "bad feeling" seems like an accurate description.

Once they disengage, Margo springs into action. The alchemy of the hormonal high mixed with the alcohol converts (thank you, Unspecified but temporarily accommodating Deity) to a jolt of adrenaline. It's a muddled, tingly sensation. She can still feel the ghost of Solas's touch on her skin, like an intimate haunting. But since the Deus Ex Machina can't be helped, she forces her attention to narrow down to the task at hand.

First things first, then. She can navigate the apothecary with her eyes closed by now, and the semi-darkness is no obstacle in her ascent upstairs — until, that is, her underwear attempts an inopportune escape. She swears, not entirely sure what language it came out in, grabs onto the treacherous slip of fabric to hold it in place — breaking your neck because you got tangled up in your own unmentionables would not be a dignified way to go — and climbs to the loft. At her back, Solas clears his throat, but blessedly doesn't offer any pertinent commentary about his opinions of her ass. Once on the loft, Margo dresses hastily, not bothering with the niceties of bandages. She buttons her jacket over her tunic, and pads back down, bear foot. Solas, damn him, looks ridiculously presentable — if she didn't know any better, she'd think he just stopped by for a lyrium potion. His expression is back to neutrally affable. He looks at her, and underneath the carefully crafted mask, a brief flash of something else — something at the messy edges between resignation and relief. But then, that's gone too, and her sudden mood must be communicative, because she can almost feel his focus hone back to scalpel-sharp precision.

She hurries to the door. Solas follows suit, and she feels more than sees the way his gliding gait shifts towards a fighting stance.

Margo opens the door.

Nothing.

She looks down.

There is a large crumpled humanoid shape curled on itself in a fetal position on the threshold. And,

of course, she can tell right away who it is — the collar is caked with snow and bristling with spiky clumps of fur, but is otherwise recognizable.

“Commander Cullen?” Margo asks, not one to neglect stating the obvious when the opportunity presents itself.

The shape doesn’t move.

What the hell? Is he drunk?

Except, the bad feeling revs up.

She crouches down and tries to feel for a heartbeat. The skin on the man’s neck is unpleasantly clammy to the touch, and cold as clay.

“I can’t feel a pulse,” Margo states, at this stage with more confusion than dread, but that’s about to change.

Solas simply steps over the Inquisition's Fallen General — rather unceremoniously, all things considered, but it does get him to the other side faster. He crouches down. His fingers palpate the neck, in a quick, expert gesture.

“We must get him inside. Now.”

Between the two of them, they hoist Cullen up, and drag him across the threshold — he is entirely unresponsive and, from Margo’s estimation, over two hundred pounds of dead weight.

They set him on the woven rug in the middle of the room, because, of course, this is not a space designed as an infirmary and there are simply no other viable options. The second their patient is on the floor, Solas begins to weave a healing spell, and Margo’s nose fills with the scent of ozone and the iodine tang of the ocean.

She grabs an elfroot potion from the shelf, crouches by the unconscious man, and lifts his head a bit so she can pour the liquid into his mouth. His jaws are clenched so tight she can’t actually pry them open. Most of the liquid simply dribbles down his chin and cheeks, soaking into the weave of the rug beneath him. She glances at Solas, and notices his grim expression.

The elf shakes his head. “He does not appear to be responding to the healing.”

“How?” Margo asks, urgently now because in the warmth of the room, she can smell the death on him, acrid, nauseatingly sweet, and almost metallic. “What would cause the spell to fail?”

“I am... no expert in healing, fenor. My abilities with this manner of magic are more blunt force than finesse. I cannot sense anything wrong with his body. It is shutting down on its own volition.”

Shit. Shit shit shit.

“Help me get the elfroot potion into him.”

With Solas’s assistance, she manages to pry Cullen’s jaw open enough to get at least some of the tonic into him. There is no swallowing reflex. Or coughing reflex for that matter. Nothing. The liquid simply spills from the corners of his lips, and dribbles down. Margo quickly tilts his head to the side to let the potion drain, lest they drown him in it. The man’s skin is taking on an alarmingly greyish hue.

They're going to lose him, and it'll be on her. If they hadn't been fucking around and wasting precious time earlier...

"He has stopped breathing," Solas states, his tone clipped.

Margo doesn't hesitate. She tilts Cullen's head back, lifting his chin away from his chest, compresses his nostrils, takes a deep breath and exhales into his mouth, hoping that enough air can get through. It's hard work, her lungs straining with the effort. It is absolutely stupid luck that he isn't wearing a chest plate. Instead, underneath the cloak, it's a simple leather jerkin, and she can see, out of the corner of her eye, his chest expand.

She pauses after the first breath, and looks down. Not good.

Another breath, and she lifts up, flattens her palms against Cullen's chest, and pushes, in rapid compressions, aiming for two per second. Counts to thirty, out loud. And then does another round of rescue breathing.

Wake up. Wake the fuck up. Come on, come on, come on.

Back to compressions again.

Distantly, she can feel Solas gather another spell. It'll be no use if Cullen doesn't breathe. If his heart doesn't start back up. She knows from experience that Solas's magic can reverse almost impossible damage, but if the body doesn't struggle to live, perhaps the magic has nothing to latch on to? There's no reviving Lazarus if Lazarus doesn't want reviving.

Then, suddenly, Cullen's body jerks, and he wheezes with his own, independent inhale.

Less than a second later Solas is pushing his magic into the supine shape, his face ethereal in the bluish glow — a specter carved of moonlight and marble.

Margo cradles the back of Cullen's neck in the crook of her elbow, lifts his head up a little, and slowly pours the rest of the elfroot potion through his teeth. He sputters, but then, at length, she watches his throat work, and most of the liquid actually ends up inside, rather than everywhere else.

The commander groans, and then Margo can feel the beginning of a strange, spastic tremor. Oh no. Oh, no, no, *not good*. She knows exactly what *this* is.

And this is where, suddenly, horribly, things click into place. The nervous jitters that night when Adan and Minaeve administered their ill-fated test. The purple circles under his eyes that never seem to go away, and that she had attributed to overwork. The sudden cardiac arrest in a man clearly at the peak of health.

But of course, none of this would have arranged itself into anything more than ominous, but random sigils if it weren't for Cullen's uncanny resemblance to her brother. And if it hadn't been for the smell. It's a different smell, but there's something about the acrid, almost chemical stench of the sweat — like burning rubber tires — that ties this night to another night, one that might as well be from another lifetime.

The night Jake overdosed.

Jake, her ridiculously talented, brilliant, always slightly unmoored brother, who picks up new skills and bad habits with equal ease, like a stray picks up burrs.

It had been a narrow thing then. He'd been clean for almost two years, but she still kept a Naloxone kit on hand, tucked away under her bed. It was stupid luck he'd been crashing at her place again for the week. It was stupid luck that the guy she'd gone on a date with had bored her within an inch of her life, and she had caught an Uber home straight after dinner, without staying for drinks — or more. It was stupid luck that it was the middle of Spring break, most of the kids had gone home or on vacation, or had already gotten most of the heavy drinking out of their system, and the little university town was down to half its population, so the roads were clear, and the ambulances were swift.

But this is not Earth. Not the quaint little artsy college town where she lived, and taught, and thought. And so, overlaying her assumptions onto this world might prove as fatal as not having a theory in the first place, even if the theory feels right.

Solas pours another wave of magic into the man who looks too much like her brother, and she can see sweat beading on the elf's temples. His face is deceptively relaxed, but she recognizes the effort there, in the line of his shoulders, in the way the tendons in his neck cord with the effort in the spell's dull glow.

Whatever Solas does, the impending seizure stops.

"Ok. Ok, now. What's he using?" Margo hears herself say, watching the man of the floor settle, slowly, into much easier breathing. "I can't tell if this is withdrawal, or if he's ODying."

The glow dwindles and Solas withdraws his hands, slumping back just a fraction, the movement almost imperceptible if her attention weren't so permanently, insistently tangled up in reading him, like some arcane, demanding, mind-boggling text.

"Forgive me, I do not know this expression." His voice sounds remote and a little abstract. "But I think I understand your question." He looks at her over the body on the floor. "Commander Rutherford was a Templar. In order to dominate mages, their order uses lyrium to dampen magic."

Of course, they do. Adan had told her as much — and she should have put two and two together. "You said he's a Templar — do you think he still takes lyrium?" she asks. "And how does it work, exactly — the addiction, I mean? Is this a matter of diminishing returns? Can someone take too much lyrium?"

Solas meets her eyes and frowns, clearly mulling over her question. "If I were to speculate, I would assume that this state was brought on by absence, rather than excess."

Margo nods again. "Because you felt that there was nothing to fix, yes?"

There's a fleeting flash of something close to surprised pleasure in his eyes, but Margo doesn't need to dwell on it for long to recognize it for what it is. She gets it. That slightly astonishing way in which they seem to occasionally tune into some shared wavelength, even when their words — and worlds — diverge.

There is a hint of movement from the commander. He groans, his eyelids fluttering. "Cassandra," he rasps.

Margo looks at Solas.

"I will fetch the Seeker." The elf straightens, and then, before she knows it, the door is closing behind him.

Margo takes off her jacket, balls it up, and sticks it under Cullen's head in a makeshift pillow. He's

back to unresponsive, but it is closer to the unresponsiveness of sleep. Either way, he's not going anywhere, and since his breathing is coming easy and deep, she trusts Solas's healing abilities enough to work from the assumption that their patient is stable, at least for now. She rushes upstairs, pulls the tunic off, and makes quick work of the wrappings. No reason to give Cassandra the "wrong idea." With her luck, this will get twisted into some sordid narrative about her predecessor's sexual escapades again. Task finished, she gets dressed again and pulls on her boots. The whole operation doesn't take more than a few minutes. She clambers down the ladder, clears the glasses and bottle of Antivan booze from the desk, and steps outside with the cast iron pot, bracing herself against the cold.

Tea. Tea is respectable. Professional, even. Who doesn't like tea?

Back in the room, Margo finds a few embers still glowing in the chimney, and she gets the fire started under the pot, now packed with fresh snow.

Cullen stirs again, and she leaves the pot to its own devices, returning to her patient's side. "Commander Rutherford, I can help you more effectively if I know what caused this." Here is to hoping that she is managing to sound soothing, yet professional.

His eyes crack open, and his gaze, bleary at first, slowly focuses on her. "I..." — he croaks — "Andraste's Mercy, what..." He tries to get himself into a sitting position, but she puts her hand on his shoulder and pushes down gently. Not that she could keep him supine if he really put his mind to the project of sitting up, but she's hoping he'll collaborate.

"Shh. Rest. You gave us a bit of a scare." When in doubt, deploy euphemisms.

He groans again. "Who is *us*?" His voice quavers a little. Then, a tad more firmly, but still with a good deal of alarm. "Who else was here?" His tawny eyes start moving frantically around the room, but the effort must be straining something in his head, because he groans again, and gives up on the enterprise, letting his eyelids droop close.

"Stop trying to move around." She gets up to check on the water. The snow has melted, but it's not at simmering point yet.

"*Who?*" There is an urgency to his question that's just one shade away from desperation. "That's a direct order, agent. You would do well to answer."

Oh, it's threats now. She supposes she should take that as a good sign about Fallen General's future prospects. "Me. And Solas, who helped stabilize you."

She hears a sigh. "So the apostate was here, was he?"

She turns around and looks at him. Cullen's eyebrows are drawn together, and he is trying to maneuver himself into a sitting position again. At this point, it is clearly easier to help him than to explain why it's not his most brilliant idea. He'll probably keep trying no matter what.

Margo helps him ascend into the nearby chair. "The apostate happened to save your life," she remarks, keeping her voice casual.

Cullen gives her a slightly chastised look, but then his expression changes from abashed to suspicious. "A rather unusual time to visit the apothecary, isn't it? Why was he here at this hour?"

"Picking up a potion," Margo lies, without missing a beat.

"In the middle of the night?" Cullen is rubbing his chest as if something in there pains him, and

Margo supposes that it probably would. She was giving the compressions her all, and, despite her smaller, narrower frame, her body is deceptively strong.

“Didn’t seem to stop you from coming by either, Commander.” Somehow, she manages to drain most of the venom from her tone. Tread carefully, and all that. “Unless you weren’t here for alchemical assistance?” Judging by his expression, he got the hint, so Margo allows her voice to soften. “There’s a reason Master Adan lets me sleep in here. We keep odd hours.” It’s a complete and utter improvisation — she’s pretty sure Adan let her sleep in the rafters because he felt sorry for her — but she’s not about to put up with 20 questions from a dude she just pulled from the brink of death.

That seems to give their fearless military leader pause. “Ah... Right. Apologies, agent. It is... none of my business.”

Margo returns to her pot. She waits, silent, for the water to boil and the silence stretches, heavy and uncomfortable. Finally, to give herself something to do, she assembles a tea from some available herbs — mostly on a hunch, based on what she has already used in other formulas. A handful of amrita vein, mainly for taste, a pinch of royal elfroot, and a few leaves of prophet’s laurel, which Auntie’s compendium mentions with great fondness. It just figures that something associated with a martyred woman would be assumed to have healing properties. Funny how things don’t change from one world to the next. She still nibbles on the dry leaf, just in case, before throwing some of its brethren into the pot. It has a kind of cooling sweetness to it, somewhere between licorice and clover blossoms. Margo nods to herself, satisfied.

She lets the herbs steep while she looks for something to hold the drink.

“Agent?”

“Apologies accepted, Commander,” she says, ladling the tea into a clay mug. She wipes the dripping liquid with her sleeve and hands Cullen the infusion. “Here. I’d imagine your throat feels... unpleasant. This may help.”

“Maker’s Breath, yes. That’s an understatement.” He takes a cautious sip, winces, and blows on the liquid. “Listen, about what you saw...”

Before he can offer an explanation, the door swings open, and Cassandra storms in, with Solas bringing up the back.

“Cullen. What happened?”

Margo stifles a fit of grim hilarity. She’s not sure how many times this particular question has been uttered in this particular room in the last few hours. Maybe she can stencil it on a cushion later. Not that she knows how to stencil, but what’s one more skill to learn for a worthy cause?

Cullen takes a look at Solas, and his expression turns stony. “I... If you permit, Seeker, we will speak of this later. Agent.” He hesitates. “A-... Solas.” Margo is absolutely certain that Cullen was about to say “apostate,” but course-corrected at the last moment. “I owe you a debt I hope I will be able to repay some day.” He pushes himself off the chair with some difficulty. “I would like this incident not to leave the confines of this room, however. The Inquisition has enough worries as it is.”

“I would advise bedrest, Commander,” Solas says quietly, his utterance mostly directed at Cassandra. She gives him a slight nod.

Margo watches the two file out of the apothecary, Cullen leaning on Cassandra for support. The warrior woman turns around in the doorway, and inclines her head, first at Margo, and then at Solas. It could be a thank you. Or it could be a “we have an understanding, don’t make me break your kneecaps.” Margo decides it’s likely both.

The door closes.

Solas glides up to her. He smells like snow, a hint of ozone, and wood smoke. On a whim, she encircles his waist and leans into him, her ear against the hollow of his throat. His arms come around her in return, his chin resting against the crown of her head, and she closes her eyes with a soft exhale, listening to the sound of his heartbeat.

“I suspect this is not the last time you have to mediate the commander’s predicament,” he offers, tone cautious and a little tense.

Margo bobs her head up and down, unwilling to disengage. Just... ten more seconds. This feels peaceful. Not many things feel peaceful these days. “I sincerely hope it falls on Adan to do the mediating, because I’m out of my depth. This was a close call. We...” She takes a breath, lets it out, and steps out of his embrace. “We shouldn’t have gotten so carried away.”

His eyes are on hers then, and she notes the brief flash of anger, there, and then quickly hidden. “Do not embark on this route to self-recrimination, lethallan. The choices he and his order made are theirs alone, as are the consequences.” She can see the tension in the line of his shoulders, in the sudden straightness of his spine. Right. Nothing says massively pissed off like perfect posture.

She shakes her head. “Not everyone is given a choice, Solas. Sometimes, choices are made for us in advance of our own capacity to make them.”

And truth be told, she is not entirely comfortable with her own line of argument, but she’s trying to formulate something more general about compassion — even though her words about choice taste hackneyed.

“Every new action — every time you draw your next breath — is a choice.” His gaze is slightly unfocused, trained on some distant, inward horizon.

“You’re oversimplifying again.”

Solas frowns. He looks like he’s about to take a step forward, but catches himself. “If the Templar Order were to discover what you are — *who* you are — they would not hesitate to do whatever they considered necessary to extract answers from you about matters they cannot possibly comprehend. It would likely end in your death.” He pauses. “Save your succor for other causes, fenor.”

“No love lost between you two, I take it?” Margo chuckles, even if Solas’s words send ice down her spine.

He frowns slightly. “I do not believe Cullen to be a bad man, whatever this might mean. But I am an apostate and an elf. Within the configuration of this world, we are natural enemies, as wolves are to sheep. It is a simple fact of nature.”

She sighs. “It’s not a fact of nature, it’s an artefact of your world’s fucked up politics.” She briefly considers the fact that she’s not at all sure which is the wolf and which is the sheep, but decides it’s probably better not to mention that. “Also, do you know the one about the wolf, the sheep, and the cabbage?”

He quirks an eyebrow at her. “Why do I have the feeling that this will be terribly indecent?”

Margo narrows her eyes. “Apparently, because you have a one-track mind. It’s actually a math riddle. A logical problem we give children to solve. I suppose I could try to make it indecent for you if you like...” She offers him a conspiratorial smile.

“Ah.” His lips quirk. “Then forgive me, ma’nas. It seems that one’s interpretations simply display the measure of one’s own wickedness.”

And at that moment, with the barely contained little smirk, he looks so entirely impish — like a folkloric trickster archetype from some Medieval woodcut — that Margo finds herself chuckling, despite the insanity of the night.

“Something amuses you, fenor?”

“You really are a special kind of bad news,” she grins.

That, somehow, launches him straight into melancholy. Margo sighs. Mercurial to the marrow of his bones, as it appears.

“We can save this debate for another night. There is the other matter of Imshael. I am having increasing difficulty joining you in the Fade — I recognize your presence, but you remain out of reach.”

Margo nods. She had begun to suspect as much. And come to think of it, weren’t most of the times that she did manage to find Solas in the Fade mediated by Baba? She wonders what this could mean.

“But you clearly have a facility with shaping the Fade, at least to some degree. It makes me wonder whether...” He stops. Looks at her as if he’s trying to peer inside, and then just shakes his head. “Until we are able to identify the cause of your elusiveness, you must use the skills you do possess to keep yourself safe. And if that fails, you may make use of certain plants to keep yourself from the Dreaming.”

Margo tries to think. She had suspected there are alchemical ways to control one’s connection to the Fade, but something about cutting herself off entirely feels... wrong. Or, rather, wasteful. “I’d rather experiment a bit before I resort to the more radical options.”

The elf gives her a long look. “Then be careful. I will continue to try to find you and offer guidance, if I am able.”

Margo nods, and rubs her eyes, which sting from lack of sleep and nervous exhaustion.

“We have an hour or so before first chant,” Solas remarks, tone carefully neutral. “I can offer you a Fadeless sleep if you wish.”

Margo tries to read his expression but gets nothing. The elf would be a menace at poker if he put his mind to it. “Would it require of you to stay awake?” she asks, mimicking the studiedly neutral tone.

He nods.

“Perhaps another time. Get some rest.”

He gives her a small, formal bow. “Strive to do the same.”

And for about an entire minute after the door closes behind him, Margo even manages to stay convinced that her refusal is just a matter of altruistic consideration. Nothing to do with her not trusting herself to actually sleep. Nope. Nothing like that.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is brought to you by a public service announcement. Stay away from addictive magical minerals. They're not good for you. Find some other way to oppress mages.

Next up: military maneuvers, more Fade stuff, and new alchemical experiments.

Among Strangers

Chapter Summary

In which the team prepares for battle, and Margo expands her arsenal.

Chapter Notes

Minimal edits for this one, but that's how it goes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"*Ougfan'sluzzil*," the Avvar repeats, his pale, callused fingers carefully smoothing out the piece of gray lichen to its full width. He peels off a strip and hands it to Margo. "You must taste, lowlander."

Margo nods dejectedly. By this point, she knows better than to protest. She'd have more luck arguing with a wall than with the damn Avvar. She pops the strip of lichen into her mouth and chews. At first, it's just a tingle on her tongue. And then her entire mouth fills with an unpleasant itchy sensation. The lichen manages to be dry and slimy all at once, to irritate and to numb. Also, it tastes a little like what happens when you combine toothpaste with orange juice.

"This is the male. The female is red. *Ougfan'sloz*."

"Do the names have meaning?" Margo asks, trying to keep her face neutral despite the awful things happening to her palate.

Amund harrumphs in exasperation. "Of course names have meaning, lowlander." He points to the blue lichen. "Veil Key."

"And the other one? The *sloz*?"

"Veil Lock."

She spits the lichen out surreptitiously, and looks to the others. Iron Bull is by the campfire, sharpening a claymore that's about the same height as Margo herself, and about half the width, the worn whetstone scraping rhythmically against the metal. On the other side, Dorian — a late, surprise addition to their team — is lounging lazily on a bedroll, leafing through Master Taigan's alchemy tome which he pilfered, rather unceremoniously, from her backpack. Sera's up in a tree above them, her presence announced by occasional pieces of bark fluttering down into Margo's hair.

Harding and the other addition to their team, who goes by Asher (though being one of Leliana's little birds the name is probably a nom de plume, or more likely a nom de guerre) are gone, scouting for dinner. If some crusty ethnographic tome titled "Peoples of Thedas" exists in some dusty corner of an Orlesian library, Margo suspects that Asher's likeness would be drawn next to the "Elves" entry. If ever there were an ur-elf. The man takes Sera's derogatory qualifier of "elfy

elf” and gives it a run for its money. He is pale, with long ash-colored hair, swept back to reveal a sharp widow’s peak, a tall forehead, a long, chiseled, aristocratic face. His eyes are the obligatory shade of frosty blue. And from the brief exchanges she’s had with him, he is an arrogant, abrasive ass. Not a charming arrogant ass, either. Not the kind of arrogant ass that you secretly suspect might turn into the object of affection of some young (but spunky) ingenue in a torrid — but tasteful — romance novel (possibly authored by Varric). Oh no. Just your plain, run of the mill, pompous shitweed with a huge chip on his shoulder.

Margo privately rechristens him as The Specimen.

They get into an altercation on the very first night they’re in the field. Margo, in charge of preparing and stockpiling utterly absurd amounts of accelerant in anticipation of attacking a Templar camp, proceeds with the task with initial enthusiasm, quickly dampened by the sheer volume of required labor. The attack on the encampment is meant to be coordinated to the other team’s parallel offensive against the mages. The other patrol contains Blackwall, Solas, Vivienne, Varric, Cassandra, and Evie, and, in theory at least, the Herald-wielding team is strolling through the refugee settlement right about now, making a fuss of taking out the mages holed up in the mountains to the north, and impressing everyone with the clout of the Inquisition’s willingness to do something about the whole sordid civil war mess. From there, their contingent, minus Evie and Cassandra, will soften enemy troops, then everyone will regroup and pick off the stragglers.

At least, that's the theory.

It’s a fine balance to strike, and Margo mulls over their predicament — they can’t exclude Evie altogether because not everyone in the ‘Inner Circle’ is in the know, and Cassandra is adamant about keeping it that way.

Mages (hopefully) subdued, they will stroll back victorious through the refugee encampment, rally support, patch up the wounded, and send whoever is in fighting shape — plus Evie and Cassandra, the inseparable duo — to rejoin the Templar offensive. The whole plan hinges on the assumption that Cassandra will be able to dampen Evie’s unfortunate side-effects with "friendly fire," unobtrusively using her Seeker abilities against the Herald and her vortex of doom.

That first night, with complicated war maneuvers on her mind, Margo is in the middle of her work, elbows deep in greasy blood lotus extract, when Asher strolls up and “accidentally” knocks over the pot, spilling its hard-earned contents on the lush grass.

“Oh, dear me,” he trails. “How very clumsy.”

Margo looks at him in mild shock.

“But I suppose accidents happen, don’t they? Like getting your whole patrol slaughtered because you’re polishing some Vint’s knob,” he muses, with the sort of carefully calculated casualness intended to kill on impact. “Didn’t think the task would be so absorbing. How does it feel to be a traitor to your own people?” he adds, just in case Margo was still confused about his feelings on the subject.

She’s had snide remarks flung at her before, and she’s certainly had her share of threats from Torquemada. Not to mention Charter’s terrifying deal. But this... this is something new.

“Is there a problem?” Of all of the people to jump to her defense, Dorian is perhaps the biggest surprise, in part because she does have a prior, longer relationship with all the others. But it’s Dorian who swoops in first, looking dapper and entirely nonchalant, with a quiet arrogance that makes even Asher come across as a snot-nosed amateur. “I’m sorry. I overheard ‘Vints’ knobs’

being discussed. I thought it proper that I should volunteer my opinion, being the proud possessor of one of those.” He fixes Asher with a derisive look. “If you are so very interested in the matter of their polishing, there is certainly some fine scholarship on the subject I would be happy to point you to. You do read, yes? Come to think of it, I am certain I could find you one with pictures. Simple pictures. Very descriptive and all that.”

Asher sneers. “Not going to offer a demonstration yourself? I bet our aspiring alchemist is more than willing to give it a go.”

“I haven’t heard her volunteer. If anything, you seem to be the one with the keen interest in the topic.”

“As if I’d get anywhere near you filthy Tevinter scum,” Asher grinds out.

“Ugh.” Sera drops silently from her arboreal perch, the unconcealed disgust in her voice so thick Margo wonders if it might be harvested for poisoning arrows. “Asher here is what gives the rest of us a bad name. ‘Traitor to your people’. Who friggin’ says that with a serious face? Pish.”

“Can’t see the appeal of fucking the enemy every once in a while?”

That’s The Iron Bull and, as always, Margo’s not at all sure who the casual question is addressed to, exactly. The Ben Hassrath is mostly quiet, except for the occasional remark that he tosses into the conversation like one might toss a stone down a well — to see what echoes back.

The less than amiable interaction on that first evening sets the tone, such that almost every conversation thereafter eventually devolves into barbs. Mostly, it’s politics, or juvenile snipes, but with a generous helping of lewdness, primarily traded between Dorian and the Qunari. Apparently, aggressive sexual innuendo is just another tool in the Ben Hassrath’s arsenal of intimidation tactics, and Margo feels a little sorry for Dorian for drawing it — though she also has the distinct impression that the mage is actually provoking Bull on purpose.

Sera and Asher mostly do an admirable job of trying to outsneer each other.

Harding tries to moderate them all at first, but then she gives up and keeps things strictly to business. And the Avvar looks on in profound indifference, until, by day two, even he is so fed up with the constant snarling that he decides to make virtue of necessity, and appoints himself Margo’s instructor.

Not that Margo is complaining. Well, not exactly. Though the transition feels like it involves toggling between fire and frying pan. The augur — the term he uses to identify himself, and which Margo translates as “ritual specialist of the seer variety” — is a terse and demanding teacher, and his primary mode of engagement is some lugubrious mixture of impatience and intransigence. Also, he makes her taste everything. Including, at one point, the desiccated excrements of some rodent with an unpronounceable name. Compared to that, the lichen might as well pass for dessert.

On the upside, the Avvar materia medica extends well beyond whatever she’s encountered in the compendia so far. Lichen, mosses, a whole slew of mushrooms, and not just ‘some fungus.’ Hardy plants that grow high in the mountains, on rocks, in crevices, under the snow. Stubborn unobtrusive things that cling to life, quietly.

Also, insects, grubs, worms, and other creepy crawlies. And, yes, a whole collection of miscellaneous droppings.

Margo gives the lichen a disgusted look.

“So, you use it to control your dreams?”

The Avvar nods. “That too. That’s not why I’ve had you collect it.” He points his chin towards the new batch of blood lotus extract. “Add it.”

“What is it going to do?” Margo asks suspiciously. She’s not about to spoil her hard work with some unknown ingredient.

“Hard to know in advance. Gods are different, so plants are different.”

Margo frowns. It is true that there can be wide variation between individual plants of the same species, and she wonders whether the Avvar explain this as a matter of variation between spirits. “Are specific gods in charge of specific places in the landscape?”

The Avvar gives her an annoyed look. “Your rulers are in charge of different territories, are they not?”

“Except under the Qun,” Dorian volunteers from his bedroll, with a quick look at the Qunari. “All are equal under the Qun, are they not? Amund, if Thedas were conquered by the Qunari, would this logically lead to greater homogeneity among plant life too?”

“There’s still variation under the Qun, Dorian,” The Bull inserts, sounding vaguely offended. “Asit tal-eb. Everything has its nature. We’re just better at recognizing it. It’s a matter of planned organization. More efficient that way.”

Dorian, apparently, was just waiting for such an opening. “And I suppose that since my nature is to be a mage, you would have me chained and gagged, just on that basis. No questions asked. No accounting for individual variations. How artfully simple!”

“I’d buy you dinner first,” Bull rumbles with the trace of a chuckle, and Margo hears the Tevinter swear under his breath.

There is a rustle of leaves. Harding and Asher emerge, dead rabbits in tow. A crow is perched on Harding’s shoulder.

“Any news?” Sera pipes up from her tree.

Harding nods and plops the future dinner down by the fire. “They’re in position. They’ll attack at night. Let’s hope the mages keep a regular schedule.”

The rest of the evening is occupied with dinner and very little conversation.

Margo is too nervous to fall asleep right away, so she volunteers to take the first watch. She spends the time drawing the new additions to her pharmacopeia in her journal. The others settle into their bedrolls, but the Augur stays by the cauldron, presumably watching the mixture.

After the snoring begins in earnest, Margo turns to the Avvar. “Amund? Can I use ougfán’sloz to cut myself off from the dreaming?” She keeps her voice quiet.

He meditates on her question before answering. “You could. But why would you want to do that, outworlder?”

“I sometimes have unwanted visitors.”

It’s hard to say with the mask, but something about the set of his jaw suggests a more

encompassing frown. In any event, when he speaks, his tone is dry. “I told you to stop calling on the wishmonger god. I can smell him on you. This will lead you nowhere good.”

Margo swallows the rising terror. “What does it smell like?” she asks, because that’s the first thought that pops into her mind and it has the benefit of distracting her from the desire to run away screaming.

“Like ash and ancient bones.”

Well, better than yak turds. There’s that.

“I’m not doing it intentionally.”

The Avvar shrugs. “That is between you and the wishmonger. You wish. And he comes. I have told you already. The world is all that is the case.”

Margo sighs. All the Avvar needs is subject object verb syntax and some very expressive pointy ears. And maybe a lightsaber. “Very well. How do I disinvent him? Can that be done?”

“Stop wishing.”

Helpful as ever.

“Any other alternatives?”

He gives her a long look. “How do you avoid unwanted visitors? You build a house. You put a door. And you hang a lock on it.”

Margo frowns. “So... I make a sanctuary.”

He nods. And then he reaches into a satchel and extracts another lichen. “Before you can make a lock, you need a key.” He hands her the crumpled strip of symbiotic organism. “Don’t spit it out this time.”

The desire to look for Solas in the Fade — and to assure herself that he and the others are alive — is almost physical, like an itch in her bones. Margo scolds herself for the irrationality of it. If everything is going to plan, the last thing he should be doing is sleeping. She needs to cut this shit out. She’s a grown woman. This — whatever the hell it is — is entirely undignified.

When she finally drifts off, she doesn’t enter the Fade. She’s violently plunged into it, dragged under by its rip currents. But once there, the experience is different. She is greeted by a rudimentary landscape: two planes, differentiated by shades of sepia, one above, and one below. No features break the monotony, and it feels like she is caught in some kind of geometry exercise, sandwiched between two instances of abstract space.

She has no idea how to build a ‘house’ — or why anyone would want to do that in this place — but the concept of sanctuary keeps tugging at her, the idea there already, half-formed, waiting for its share of attention.

She doesn’t know how to build.

But she knows how to grow things.

She closes her eyes and pours emotions into the image, carved out of memories as much as from

the feelings that wrap around them, a sense of yearning and loss, a nostalgia that would be maudling if it weren't tinged with a deep sense of gratitude for the fact that this place exists, somewhere. She sees it in her mind's eye first. The embankment, dotted with the purple and yellow blossoms of malempyrum, slopes gently towards the sluggish waters of the ancient river. A soft breeze catches in the branches of the weeping willow. The hills on the other bank stretch in purple shadows across the shimmering surface. The sun has set, and the sky is turning a piercing cerulean. It smells of summer grasses and warm earth, of green living things cooling off and furling into sleep for the night.

Further up the embankment, baba's ashes are scattered under the aspen tree. Downstream, in the little cemetery by the medieval church, her parents' graves. But in between, in the calm crook of the river, she and Jake spent countless summers lazing in the grass and trapping frogs. Bathing and fishing and swinging from the willow's branches and dropping into the water with terrified and triumphant ululations. Here, she shared kisses and pilfered apples with Ivan, when it was just becoming clear that there was more to them than two sooty-footed kids growing up together in a forgotten village. Here, she brought Lily as a baby, to introduce her to the place where the roots extend beneath the earth, quiet and deep.

She opens her eyes under a cerulean sky.

The world is all that is the case.

The next day starts off about as well as you might expect, but at least Margo got some rest. Until, that is, she is woken up by a not particularly playful kick to the ribs from Asher. "Get up. Harding wants you on artificer duty."

Margo doesn't dignify him with the logical question that might clarify what an artificer is. She's sure Harding will explain soon enough, and the less she interacts with the Specimen, the better off she'll be.

Bull and Sera are still asleep, snoring. The Avvar might be sleeping — he is sitting in some kind of meditative trance, chin resting on his chest. He appears otherwise unresponsive. Dorian is nowhere in sight, and Margo concludes that he scampered off for toileting purposes.

"You need a minute?" Harding asks her. The dwarva crouching by the fire looks as fresh-faced and well-rested as if she just returned from a week-long spa vacation. Margo represses a jolt of envy.

She nods and wanders off to the bushes. Business completed, she returns to the campfire.

Harding already has an elaborate diagram sketched out in the dust. She adds details with the tip of a sharpened stick.

"Any news?"

Harding nods. "Crow arrived before dawn. The mages are taken care of."

"How did our side do?"

The scout shrugs, something tense to the set of her shoulders. "Not too bad. Everyone's alive."

Margo exhales, not realizing until after that she'd been holding her breath. "Any injured?"

"The Warden and the Seeker took a beating, but nothing too bad. The Herald is unscathed. The

images are mostly fine, some scrapes and bruises. The Orlesian had some kind of wardrobe accident, though that might be Tethas's embellishments. Our resident Professional Bullshitter made it out alive too. He was the one who sent the message.”

Margo feels her eyebrows shoot up in surprise at this shockingly positive news. It would appear that Cassandra's plan actually worked. And for the first time in what feels like ages, she allows herself to feel cautiously optimistic. Maybe they're not all going to hell in a handbasket, after all. Wouldn't that be something.

“So what's our next steps?”

Harding taps her diagram. “They will want to rest and resupply in the settlement. I'm going to guess they'll be here by the evening. We'll attack before first light tomorrow.”

Margo nods. It seems reasonable. “Is the whole contingent coming along?”

Harding shakes her head. “Vivienne and Varric will stay behind in the village.”

Margo considers the combination, and the strategy behind it. “Vivienne to reinstate trust in law-abiding mages, and Varric to spin stories.”

Harding chuckles. “Yup. Vivienne will terrorize any skeptics into submission with her impeccable manners and Varric will lie his ass off.”

“So what's our task? I have the impression you're not intent on waiting for the cavalry.”

Harding considers the diagram with a pensive expression. “We'll wait. But in the meantime, we're going to set a snare.”

The strategy is delightfully simple. There is only one route to access the Templar camp, and it is open and uphill, putting any attacking group at a severe disadvantage. The camp is, in fact, naturally fortified, blocked off by steep cliffs on one side, and a ravine on the other. What the Templars didn't account for is an attack from above.

It is still dark when the two Inquisition scouts, complete with ugly green hoods, materialize from the shadows with a large crate in tow. The crate, as it turns out, is filled with crude clay pots. From there, the work is finicky and monotonous, but it has the merit of being straight-forward. Margo fills each pot with the accelerant mixture she's been collecting in a specially-dedicated barrel. Harding helps her seal the pots with cloth and beeswax, and Margo outfits each one with a wick. The final results look like the illegitimate spawn of a pot for pickling kimchi and a molotov cocktail.

She sets her batch of lichen-tainted stuff aside. The mixture has turned overnight into a sticky black ooze vaguely reminiscent of tar, but with more personality. It jiggles uninvitingly when moved. Whatever it is, she is not using it for making bombs before testing it for its properties. The last thing anyone needs is for the vaguely evil looking brew to start behaving in inappropriate ways instead of being a good sport and exploding.

Margo stares at the pots because suddenly, in the unwelcome pause between actions, a thought creeps in. A very unpleasant thought. She is making bombs. Bombs, Karl. Intended to kill, or at least seriously damage people, the more the merrier. Living breathing human beings.

She looks around, suddenly feeling helpless, lost, and profoundly, monumentally alone. But there

is no one to turn to. Every single one of the others is a killer. Safe, perhaps, for Dorian, but she can't know for certain.

And, of course, so is she.

She doesn't have the luxury of showing even a trace of ambivalence without endangering herself and her cover. Rich and layered as Maile's reputation was, it isn't one that includes any compunctions about the ethics of her chosen path.

Margo is startled out of her bleak reverie by a light touch on her shoulder. The Avvar, no longer in his meditative trance, has moved silently to her side.

"You may be the arrow, outsider. You may even be the bow. But you are not the hand that pulls the string. If you fly, it is because such is the will of the gods."

Margo shakes her head in refusal. "A convenient philosophy. But I can't absolve myself of responsibility, Amund."

This, somehow, strikes the Avvar as hilarious, because he suddenly lets out a loud guffaw and smacks his thigh. The noise startles Sera and Iron Bull awake.

"You have a prideful streak, lowlander. Those men we will attack have made their choice, as is pleasing to their gods."

"But what about randomness?" Margo pleads, frustration creeping into her tone. "Don't you think your model is too tidy? You can't possibly think that everyone deserves what they get. What if someone comes into your house with a weapon while you're sleeping? Does it mean that this is what your gods willed too?"

The Avvar's lips purse into a smile. "If someone comes into my house to kill me in my sleep, lowlander, I will simply not be there."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you because the gods willed it.

Next up: Reunions, skirmishes, and more trouble on the horizon.

Note: In case you're wondering about linguistics, I am deriving the Avvar dialect from Old High German.

Crow Bait

Chapter Summary

Fade visits, battle preparations, and unreliable mail service.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When evening meal comes and goes the next day, and the others still haven't manifested — or sent a message — a lively debate breaks out in their group over what to do next. The Iron Bull, Asher, and Sera advocate for continuing with the planned attack. Harding vacillates, torn between caution and fear that the element of surprise would be lost the longer they linger in one place. Dorian remains neutral. Margo and Amund are in favor of delaying. Amund is adamant. Margo, more diplomatic.

“Are you blind to the signs, Child of the Mountain?” Amund asks the Dwarven scout, after it becomes clear the pendulum is swinging towards the more immediately aggressive strategy. “Do you not see the carrion crows flying a circle over the ridge?”

Harding, clearly unsure why the augur has selected her as the designated decision-maker, adopts a defensive stance. “First off, I am a surface dwarf, Amund. And second, who's to say the birds are predicting a bad outcome for us? For all we know, the Templars are butchering a carcass for their dinner, and they're circling for the left-overs.”

Amund shakes his head in dismay. “The Mountain is in the bone. You can no more renounce its bowels than I can renounce its spine. And carrion crows do not circle for a butchered carcass. They circle because they sense a battle approaching.”

“How can you tell their circling is a bad omen?” The Iron Bull queries, genuine curiosity in his voice.

“The direction.”

They dismiss his warning with bluster and grumblings about superstition, so Margo, who feels an increasing sense of unease prick her spine, throws her voice in with the Avvar. “Do the advantages of attacking now truly outweigh the benefits of a larger contingent?” Her eyes flick between the Iron Bull and Harding, because, in her estimation, the two are really the main strategists of the group.

“Our odds become worse the longer we stay.” Harding pushes a stray ember back into the campfire with the tip of her boot. “Attacking during the day would be much more costly, even with greater numbers, and if we linger until tomorrow night, we might have reinforcements to deal with. With the mages out of the picture, there is a chance the other patrols will rally at their base camp to work out their next move.”

“I say we take the fight to them tonight, as planned.” The Iron Bull shifts his claymore, planting it between his thighs, giant hands flexing on the haft. “What's the point of sitting on our asses? We have a good mix of melee, stealth and long range as it stands.” He looks at Amund. “That

warhammer of yours could use some exercise. Not good keeping a weapon bloodless for too long.”

Amund grunts noncommittally.

The Qunari surveys them, his good eye catching the crimson glow of the flames. “Amund, Asher and I can rappel down the side of the ravine to that platform over the stream. Much easier to do at night. Dorian, Harding and Sera will provide cover fire from the top of the cliff. Blondie — can you use the bombs to hem in the Templars before you join us?”

Margo considers this. “You want me to cut them off from retreating downhill?” By this point, she’s got Harding’s dust map of the camp memorized. She meets Bull’s gaze over the flames. “Keep in mind that you will be hemmed in as well.”

He nods. “That’s the idea.”

“It’s risky,” Harding volunteers, but Margo notices that the scout’s body language has shifted, a kind of jittery excitement creeping into her movements. “But it’s what we had planned to do if the Herald had made it to the rendezvous point on time anyway. I say a stealthy attack still gives us a much better shot than a frontal assault during the day. I hate to waste another night.”

“Take them out while they’re sleeping,” Sera pipes up. “Oh, you were having a snooze? Blimey! Arrow to your face!” The elf laughs uproariously at this. Bull rumbles a chuckle.

Dorian shakes his head in consternation. “Much as I hate to be the voice of cautious dissent, it seems to me that we have little room for mistakes, considering we lack a trained healer in the group,” he offers. “My expertise is... elsewhere.”

“We have an alchemist. How’s our health potion supply?” Bull asks, his eye on Margo.

She shrugs. “It’s adequate. But I agree with Dorian. If we decide to do this, I would advise against spectacular heroics.” She rubs her face, trying to trace the “bad feeling” to its source. Maybe this is the wisest course of action after all. Her worry for the others might be coloring her judgement of their current strategy.

“So now, you’re the cautious one. Where was that caution at the Storm Coast, hmm?” Asher looks like he’s itching for a fight, and doesn’t much care who the fight is with.

“We still don’t know what happened to your other team,” Amund suddenly inserts, his deep voice slicing through the atmosphere of rising battle rage.

Margo fidgets uncomfortably. That is, indeed, a problem.

“And sitting here with our thumbs up our asses is gonna answer that how?” Sera plucks an arrow from her quiver, and starts twirling it around like some perversely pointy baton. “Maybe they’re all drunk and having a group bang in a tavern somewhere to celebrate. If they show, they can join the fun. Hey! We can leave them a note!” Her voice drops into an imitation of male efficiency suspiciously reminiscent of The Iron Bull. “Off to kill some Templars. Sorry we missed you.”

Margo makes a concerted effort to scrub Sera’s evocative image of a “group bang” from her mind, and considers their options. There is, of course, the other side of the scales to consider: namely, Evie and her vortex of doom. If she arrives, they would have another risk factor to contend with. But then, this brings her to the politics of appearances that underlie Cassandra’s plan.

“Shouldn’t the Herald be seen neutralizing the Templars?”

The Bull graces her with a speculative look, and Margo squirms under the scrutiny.

“Seen by whom, Blondie? We’re in the middle of nowhere. No settlements around. Unless Cassandra was planning to leave a strategic witness... Otherwise, it’s whatever we say happened.”

Margo has no retort to that. The conversation bounces around for a few more turns, but she has the distinct feeling that the matter is settled before they run out of words.

As they begin preparations, Amund nods at her, and Margo follows him to the outer perimeter of the camp.

“This is a bad idea, Outworlder,” the Avvar offers, his tone impassive. “Watch the birds.”

She follows his gaze to where a flock of crows flies in a gliding circle, stark black shadows against the gloaming.

“What do your signs tell you, Amund?”

“That death comes this way.” His tone is conversational, on the edge of indifferent.

Margo hesitates. “But for whom?” she finally asks. “Maybe it’s death for the Templars?”

The Augur shrugs. “Your Templars aren’t the ones querying the Lady of the Sky. I am.” He pauses. “Death isn’t picky.”

Margo considers his statement. From what she can tell, this is another Avvar meditation on luck, fate, and signs. Slowly, a kind of tentative understanding materializes, and she decides to test her theory. “So, you’re saying that because you’re the one asking about the outcome, you are being given a specific answer — so the birds aren’t a sign to just anyone, they are a sign to you?”

Amund nods. “That they are. A man asks a question of another man in a room full of people. To whom is the answer given? To the room full of people? Or to the one who asked?”

So this is an issue of addressee. “I suppose it depends on the question. Sometimes we ask for the benefit of others.”

Amund shakes his head, his dark eyes inscrutable. “There is no ‘benefit’. Your question is your question. The same words in someone else’s mouth are theirs, not yours. An answer cannot be collectivized, Outworlder.”

Margo sighs. She would love to delve into this more deeply, to tease apart the Avvar’s worldview. But there is no time, at least not now. They have more pressing matters than discussing cosmology. “All right. What should we do?”

The Avvar watches the birds for what feels like an eternity. Finally, his chest lifts in a sigh. “Your last potion. The one with ougfansluzzil. Coat your daggers with it. You must fight.” He pauses. “Who knows. You might yet tip the scales.”

“It’s not an explosive, is it?” Margo asks, wondering not for the first time about the ways in which this world’s alchemy lends radically versatile results with what seems like comparatively little processing.

“No.” The Avvar says, but, predictably, he fails to elaborate.

“Is the formula a secret?” she asks. Why is Amund so tight-lipped about it?

After a long pause, he shakes his head. When he finally responds, there is a trace of humor in his voice. “It is a gamble, Outworlder. A bit like you.”

Before she rejoins the others in their preparations, the Avvar stops her, his heavy hand landing on her shoulder and practically rooting her in place with its weight. “You have a bit of time before we must depart. Consider sleep.”

An incredulous laugh escapes her at the suggestion. “You think this is a good time for a nap, Amund?”

Under the metal glint of the mask, his eyes crinkle at the corners, but she cannot tell whether it is a smile, or a skeptical squint. Whatever the expression, it never reaches the bottom of his face. “Speak to your... friend, if you can. We must know what happened to your other people. And why the birds no longer bring the words.”

Margo frowns, trying to infer how much Amund knows about her occasional ability to communicate with Solas. The augur’s speech is like an imperfect translation, and she is unsure of whether this is a linguistic problem — that he is, in fact, translating in his head from whatever dialect is the Avvar’s native tongue — or if it is a translation of a more spiritual sort.

“Provided I can even fall asleep. And provided my ‘friend’ is asleep as well,” Margo objects. “That’s a lot of conjecture.”

Amund lifts his head, his eyes tracing the patterns of feathery clouds in the evening sky. He seems absorbed in some silent calculation.

“Now would be a good time to try,” he finally offers.

And so, with a small piece of the damnable lichen in her hand, Margo settles under a tree at the periphery of the camp, folding her body into an imitation of the Avvar’s meditative pose. She contemplates the ougfán’sluzzil. “One pill makes you larger, one pill makes you small,” she hums. Right. Forget the lightsaber. What the Avvar really needs is a hookah and a giant mushroom to sit on.

She pops the lichen into her mouth and chews with grim determination. And then she closes her eyes, and allows for her breathing to deepen.

She’s back to the abstract space sandwich, with nothing there but sepia-colored dust. The plane that passes for the sky has a slight green tinge, but nothing like the blazing lime green of the Breach. At least, there are no visitors when she arrives.

She closes her eyes within the dream, and she tries to reach with that part of herself that, until not so long ago, she had no idea was there. “Solas.”

Nothing happens whatsoever. Absolutely nothing. The abstract sandwich remains woefully unimpressed with her efforts.

This is a profound waste of time. She can’t control these Fade calls any more than she can control the weather.

“Solas,” she tries again, attempting to recollect that sense of him, the complicated weave of his

essence. She opens her eyes. This time, somewhere far off in the distance, she spots a lonely figure.

Of course, it could be anyone — from where she stands, it is not much more than a humanoid outline, a shimmering mirage against the sepia tint. It could be the Cosmic Asshole, for all she knows, and then she's truly fucked, because something about this way of rendering the Fade feels like a secret, like one little bit of advantage she might have over the "Choice Spirit." But for lack of a better alternative, she begins moving towards the lone visitor, first at a casual pace, then picking up speed, and, finally, settling into a light jog.

Closer now, she sees the figure turn to her, the familiar silhouette thinned by the distance into something spectral.

Now, the question is whether it is the right Solas. He seems to hesitate for a few seconds, and then he begins to move briskly in her direction, except it doesn't look like he's walking. Instead, it is as if the ground layer is moving past him.

When they finally come face to face, Margo releases her breath. It is, most certainly, Solas. "Where the hell are you?" she demands, the tension over his and the others' unexplained absence erupting into a profound failure at composure, let alone diplomacy.

Before she can badger him with more outraged demands for an explanation, the elf is upon her. His hands tangle roughly in her hair. She squeaks in surprise as he tilts her head back, his eyes searching her face for an answer that doesn't shape itself through words. A huff of mute frustrations escapes him, and then his lips are on hers. The kiss is urgent and demanding, as if he is trying to get across whatever borders their Fade-rendered bodies allow.

He tastes of dust and thunder.

Margo makes a muffled little noise that might have started as a question, but then quickly turns into plain old need. His hands feel like they're everywhere at once — in her hair, on her shoulders, tracing the line of her waist, and then settling on her ass and pulling her pelvis flush against him.

And then, as if suddenly recalling himself, he stumbles back, letting his arms drop to his sides, startled anguish passing over his features before his habitual neutral mask snaps into place. For the briefest of moments, he looks like he's tempted to reach for her again, as if to ascertain himself that she is really there, but then he stops himself mid-gesture and takes another deliberate step backward, the sudden distance between them like a raised shield.

"I... forget myself. I apologize." He shakes his head, in consternation or in denial — Margo is not sure which.

"Solas?" Her lips still tingle from their kiss. "What is going on?"

Another indeterminate head shake. "It would appear that you are real after all," he finally comments, his voice low and rough. "And alive."

Margo tries to read his features, but the expression is too complex to parse. It puts her in mind of a patient who had received a dire diagnosis, only to have it suddenly revoked as a lab error. She frowns, trying to understand why he would have questioned her reality.

Solas, in the meantime, starts pacing.

"What made you think I wasn't?" she asks cautiously.

He whirls towards her, his bare heels kicking up little clouds of dust that hang in suspension,

settling too slowly. The trace of a future movement erodes into willed immobility. "You were gone." He makes a slicing motion with his hand, as if to indicate the finality of such an absence. "No sign of you in the Fade. There were no memories, no lingering traces. Nothing at all. As if you had never existed." He starts to pace again, an odd abruptness to his movements in eerie contrast to his usual gliding grace. He gestures as he talks. "At first, I had told myself that you were avoiding sleep, but such an assumption seemed unlikely. Even in wakefulness the Fade retains an imprint — memories, emotions, attachments. Desires. One is never fully disconnected, unless Tranquil or dead. Under normal circumstances, I can sense your existence, regardless of whether I can reach you. I had... come to expect the reassurance it offers. Until it was gone."

"Something felt different this time?"

Solas nods, his eyes locking with hers. Her face must be telegraphing her total lack of comprehension, and he elaborates, his voice still ringing with almost existential dread. "You were no longer there at all." He pauses, seemingly looking for words. "In the Fade, time is not so... sequential. I sought you out, but all my senses told me that you had never been. If not for the others' corroboration..." He laughs, the sound mirthless and brittle in the eerie emptiness of their shared non-space. "I had to ask Blackwall if he recalled you. I believe the Warden might think me mad. I was in fact beginning to think he might be correct on that account. I had half a mind that I *imagined* you. I told myself, one more attempt to reach you in the Fade, before accepting the inevitable."

Margo reaches for his hand. "Amund taught me a new trick. I will tell you about it when we have more time, but the main goal was to help me avoid Imshael."

Solas's fingers interlace with hers, and then, perhaps to garner further proof of her relative materiality, he tugs her against him once more, his other arm snaking around her waist. He takes a quiet breath, and his rigid posture softens a fraction. At length, the beginning of a smile tugs at the corners of his lips. "A new trick," he parrots back, his voice an unlikely mixture of annoyance, relief, and cautious amusement. "I will *show* you 'new tricks.'"

Her follow-up question never passes her lips — his mouth on hers muffles the words, scrambling her thoughts until only the thrumming of her Fade-manifested body remains, too realistic for comfort, tense and boneless and aching all at once.

When they pull apart, not a little reluctantly, Margo abruptly recalls that her seeking him out in the Great Sepia Sandwich had a pragmatic goal. It has the effect of a cold shower — a much needed one, she decides. Maybe she could coax the Fade into manifesting actual cold showers next time. "I would still like to know why you lot didn't show up. The others have decided to go on with the plan without you. We attack the Templar camp later tonight."

"Did you not receive our messages?"

Uh-oh. Maybe Avian Mail is on strike?

Solas frowns. His hands on her upper arms tighten. "The Herald sought to help the refugees, ensuring they would survive the winter months. Their situation is dire and urgent. They are on the edge of starvation. Many are separated from their kin, desperately looking for news. A raven should have carried a request for you to delay."

Margo shakes her head. "We received no such messages. Have you gotten ours?"

"No." He peers at her, oddly hesitant, then he casts his gaze towards the featureless ground. "When I had confirmed you... real, but gone, I came to the most logical conclusion. I had assumed

something had happened. I cautioned the seeker not to proceed until we learned more about the fate of your patrol. If your team was lost already..." He clears his throat. "Since there were other tasks that required immediate attention, and would further the Inquisition's goals..." He trails off.

Margo mulls this over. It makes sense. No matter what happens to any of them, the main priority is to keep Evie out of trouble. And the whole point of their overwrought maneuvering is to garner support. Political power. She would have likely done the same if their places had been reversed, even if it would have torn her up. She looks at the elf again, and suddenly the jumble of emotions she can sense from him lends itself to easier interpretation. "A prudent decision." She kicks the ambivalence under the proverbial rug, to join all her other unwelcome thoughts. Hopefully the rug conceals a pocket universe, otherwise she will run out of room.

"Yes." His features turn hard, as if he is executing his own rug sweeping maneuver.

"You worried me," Margo adds, not liking his expression one bit. "I had similar thoughts regarding your fate. Minus the concern over your reality, that is."

Some complicated emotion flickers in his eyes, the primary ingredient of which seems to be doubt. "I..." With a visible effort, he shifts his focus. "Will you be able to overcome the Templars on your own? We are half-a-day's journey away."

"I hope so. Amund is worried, but the others are eager."

Solas lips press into a grim line. "Then I will advise Cassandra to make haste. Can you delay until morning?"

"Harding thinks this should be done under the cover of darkness. She and Bull are planning a stealthy attack."

Solas vacillates, but then his hands come up to cup her face, and he peers at her, as if trying to impart something important without the use of words. "You will be cautious?"

Margo smiles at him. "Of course. You know me. I'll throw some bombs, insult their mothers and their manhood. The usual."

He gives her an irritated look. "This will again result in me having to put you back together, I suspect."

"And there's your incentive to be punctual," Margo teases.

The elf makes a displeased little sound at the back of his throat, and pulls her into another embrace, bringing their faces close. "Must I give you an 'incentive' not to get yourself killed, fenor?"

"I won't stop you from trying..."

And try he does. Whatever he laces into the kiss isn't physical, more of an added psychic dimension, where something of the underlying feelings trickle from him into her perception. It's a kaleidoscopic glimmer of images and sensations, rendered briefly and only in fleeting flashes, there and then gone in the next instant — the ghost of a touch, the trace of a memory that isn't one. One flicker in particular extrapolates what would have happened had Cullen not interrupted them, and it sears itself into her awareness with its uninhibited, unapologetic salacity. Apparently, in that particular instantiation of a quantum probability that did not come to pass, she would have ended up on top of the work station — a scenario which, she supposes, would have taken advantage of their height difference. The image is from his perspective. Margo gasps against his lips, and then, with the one fragment of her attention that isn't entirely flooded, she forms her own fake memory

bubble and retaliates. That one elaborates on the chair option. It's nowhere near as visually detailed as his, but what it lacks in graphics, it makes up in haptics. He shudders against her with a groan and sends back another image, half-scrambled. Some wall, somewhere, she's not sure which — the decor is an afterthought. He uses sound to convey the general idea. In the vision, they are both carelessly vocal.

Margo tries to condense another image to send back, but she can't muster the necessary focus. Something passes between them, sidestepping the lure of the physical. The image slips, spilling. Beneath her fingers, the sudden coolness of skin. Shaky bursts of breath against her ear. The landscape begins to shift, the Sepia Sandwich eroding, morphing into something else, yet undecided.

They practically tumble away from each other. The surrounding world stabilizes once again. Margo presses her hands to her cheeks, but her palms offer no coolness. Right. It's one thing to be reasonably certain of another's apparent intentions, based on outward signs, and an altogether other thing to get a peek into their head.

"That..." Solas breathes out, his eyes narrowing in something that mixes, in an utterly incomprehensible combination, desire, humor, and alarm. With a great deal of the first, and not a small dose of the last. "What exactly is that Avvar teaching you?"

"Hey! Leave Amund out of this — I learn by imitation. Besides, you started this."

"I most certainly did not. I shared a... thought. Not the..." He clears his throat. "Physical sensations that may accompany it."

Margo represses an impending fit of undignified hilarity. "As I recall, you shared more than just *one* thought. Besides, why would the visual be fair game, but the sensory too much?" she asks, certain that his usual cheeky expression has somehow passed on to her.

For a few seconds, he just looks vexed, but then the annoyance cedes its place to a wicked sort of amusement. "I suppose that is a philosophical question?"

Margo grins. "We have a peculiar record of debating those."

"Yes. And unless you plan to follow up on that 'thought' in the immediate future, I would suggest we return to more pressing issues."

Margo looks him over and makes a herculean effort to refrain from pointing out the facile double entendre. Still, the giggles bubble up to the surface. And of course, she's pretty sure he knows exactly where her train of thought took her, because he frowns and shifts in place, looking at once incensed, amused, and exasperated.

"I'm sure between the two of us we could conjure up a bed." She somehow manages an even tone. "Or a chair. An alchemy table? Or was it a wall?" She loses the internal battle, and dissolves into chortles.

The elf shakes his head. "Do not tempt me, or I assure you I will take you up on your implied offer, and we will make do without any furniture at all," he comments, rather dryly at that. But the look he gives her makes Margo's legs turn to water, and generally bodes poorly for her continued commitment to remaining vertical. She closes her eyes to get him out of her visual field, which would make for one less irritant to her already overloaded nervous system.

She hears Solas sigh, and she can almost feel the shift in his mood. "Oh, ma'nas. This..." There is

a long pause. “Distraction. It is ill-conceived. You have a battle ahead of you. I have taken up too much of your time and attention.”

She opens her eyes, and meets his now shuttered gaze. All the laughter drains out of her, and the expression she returns is guarded. The "distraction" track seems to be habitual for him, and Margo suddenly has to wrestle with the certainty that at its end lies the sight of him walking away. And whatever iatrogenic effects this will have on her heart at this point. A question she is not at all ready to consider.

“And there will be battles after this one, all of them with an uncertain outcome for any of us. A distraction by any other name is whatever semblance of a life one can scrape together in the middle of this shitshow.” She pauses, steeling herself for the next part of her question, because, in the end, she is not at all certain what his answer might be. She did not anticipate ending up at this particular juncture — not here, not now — but there’s no helping what’s done. Fate isn’t a dog, you can’t beat it away with a stick, as Baba would have it. “Would you begrudge me that? Or yourself?”

She watches the echoes of his usual internal conflict play out in his eyes, and then his gaze softens. But his face retains the hard edges of whatever mask he chooses to hide himself behind. “I... am uncertain.” He looks away, letting his eyes glide over the featureless landscape. “Would you permit me to revisit this question at a later date?”

Margo makes herself nod, despite the painful constriction in her chest. She forces her face into a neutral expression. “Sure. I suppose there are Templars to deal with first.”

He gives her a long look, and she wonders if he is about to add something. “Please do be careful,” he finally murmurs.

“And you.”

Before she can say goodbye, she is jolted out of the Fade.

“Good nap, Outworlder?” Amund asks. Margo is pretty sure the Avvar’s eyes are crinkled in amusement.

From the top of the cliff, the camp is hardly visible. Above them, the sky is a velvety black, and the unfamiliar clusters of stars look like tiny holes punctured in a thick black veil.

The lone sentry walking around with his torch, in commendably predictable intervals of about ten minutes, is the only source of illumination. From his oscillatory ambling, Margo gets the layout of the camp: a few tents, mostly lining the edge of the ravine, some supply crates and other military miscellanea sheltered under an overhang. Bedrolls clustering around a campfire, probably for the grunts — she guesses the higher-ups get their own tents.

It’s not that different from any of the camps she has stayed in so far, and the parallels weigh on her.

They crawl, as quietly as they can, in the sparse shrubbery at the top of the rocky plateau. Margo nestles a bomb into a shallow indentation between two rocks, right at the edge of the cliff. The little pocket hugs the bottom of the pot securely enough that it wouldn’t tumble down on its own, though it shouldn’t require much more than a gentle push.

There are six bombs in total, and they set them up strategically, Harding squinting into the darkness and then indicating where the pots ought to go. When the sentry is at the far side of his perimeter, they move, steps light, mindful not to dislodge any pebbles. It’s like one of those

“freeze” games that children play, except with explosives.

By the time the bombs are in place, a moon, entirely too large by Earth standards, creeps up from behind the mountain range — a fat, tawny disk bisected by some kind of geological formation that appears to be a giant chasm. Margo squints at it, her brow furrowed. Until seeing it, the idea that she is, in fact, on a different planet somehow hadn’t crossed her mind.

She shoves the thought firmly under the proverbial rug, again. Maybe all those unwilling thoughts can form a committee.

She plops down next to Dorian, who is leaning his back against a rock, tracing some kind of sigil in the dust with the tip of his staff. Sera, on the other side of the small platform where they’ve set up an intermediary relay point, is perched on a boulder — in a pose vaguely reminiscent of those gargoyles you find at the top of medieval cathedrals and overpriced New York City condos. She is fletching an arrow.

“Still nothing?” Harding asks quietly, and the other two shake their heads.

She turns to Margo.

“Are you certain your information is reliable? We have nothing else to go on.”

Margo shrugs. “Yes. Unless something else holds them up, they will arrive by morning.” She draws a breath, her chest tight. “We might as well start.”

Chapter End Notes

Mostly edited for clearer foreshadowing.

Combustion (^)

Chapter Summary

In which Margo deploys some bombs, encounters an armored mollusk, and Dorian's spells are most unpleasant.

CW: graphic depiction of violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

With her stomach pressed against the rough limestone surface at the edge of the cliff, Margo waits. In the bluish moonlight, the rest of her patrol has melted into the shadows at the clifftop, and the faint illumination doesn't reach into the ravine at all. Some twenty feet beneath her, the sentry does another circle, the soft clanking of his armor drifting up to her hiding spot. He pauses. In the glow of the torch he carries, she sees him shuffle in place, boredom and tiredness making his movement sluggish.

Somewhere to her left, a soft bird call rises from the velvety darkness. It sounds like an owl's hoot, low and muffled. Unless it's an actual owl, which just happened to decide to hoot in the Thedosian version of Morse code, it's her cue. She waits for another few seconds. The return call is a crow's caw. Hopefully, this is indeed her team communicating, and not the local birds having a midnight chat — just your neighborly avian exchange. “Hello neighbor, how about them mice?”

Margo takes a fortifying breath and extracts the “match” that Harding gave her: a shard of red mineral attached to a stick by some kind of petrified resin. Harding had referred to it, in helpfully descriptive fashion, as a “fire crystal.”

“*Mother, do you think they'll drop the bomb?*” Margo mouths quietly, because Pink Floyd is better than an anxiety attack. Have bomb, will travel. There it goes. She strikes the crystal against a rock. It flares to life, the sudden heat scalding her fingers, and she brings it to the makeshift wick of her kimchi-pot-qua-weapon-of-mass-destruction. The oiled cloth catches with an enthusiastic “*frrrrrrr*.”

Three, two, one. She pushes the pot off the ledge. It goes tumbling down the cliffside, and for a second Margo's stomach drops with it — she can almost feel herself hurling down after the pot, the bomb like an extension of her own body. And then her stomach drops further still, because what if the wick goes out?

There's no real detonation — at least, based on the sound. But light and heat flare up from the ravine, the blast of hot air blowing stray strands of Margo's hair back from her face. A man screams... and then screams, and screams, a horrible sound. There goes the sentry. Margo grinds her teeth against the stench — pungent, oily smoke; hot metal; and a whiff of charred meat.

“*Mother, do you think they'll like this song?*” She forces the lyrics out between clenched teeth. Better clenched than chattering. Chances are, they won't like it one little bit.

The camp bursts into a frenzy of activity like one of those wasp nests she and Jake would stupidly poke with a stick when they were kids before running for cover. Not the best time to introspect over one's childhood. Margo springs to her feet and she quickly sets off in the direction of the next

bomb, wedged into a crevice about fifteen paces from where she is crouching. No telling what the others are doing, but some of the shouts seem to be coming from her team. Then, as if her ears suddenly tune into it, the whistle of arrows and the thwack of a bowstring, pulled and released at incredible speed.

Ten more paces. More shouts from below. A cry, gurgling, then rasping, and she sees, in her mind's eye, an arrow piercing a throat. Hopefully not one of theirs.

Mother, do you think they'll try to break my balls? Ball-breaking. A time-honored practice, that.

Five paces.

“There! By the cliff! Get that warrior!” someone bellows below. A roar, the sound bestial and a little demented — she decides this must be Bull's battle cry. Metal clanking against metal with a thick, echoing resonance that reverberates through her teeth.

Zero.

Margo falls to her knees by the bomb and peers down. Shadows dance and wobble below, like some medieval fantasy of Hell. There, right by that tent. She just needs to angle the projectile to hit the ground in front of those two templars guarding the tent's entrance. The two archers draw their bows and aim into the semi-darkness, but they do not move away from the tent. Maybe there's something valuable in there; best not set it on fire then.

She waits for the bird call. Another crow's caw, and she hits her match against the ground at her feet, but it's too dusty, and the crystal doesn't catch. She switches tactics and uses the rough clay flank of the pot. The crystal flares. The red spark runs down the length of the cord with a crackle. She picks up the bomb. It's heavy, but she can lob it if she uses both hands. Ah fuck, she's probably going to blow herself up in the long run. Two, one...

She hurls the pot and crouches at the edge of the cliff, watching the pot's parabolic arc. One of the templars looks up. Too late for him. He still manages to yell “cliff top” before the flames engulf him.

Mother, should I build the wall?

Whatever will keep you busy, honey.

An arrow whistles past her ear, close enough for the gust of displaced air to ruffle the hairs at her nape. Close, but no cigar, you fuckers.

Ten paces.

A flare of purple — straight ahead along the cliff's edge — silhouettes a man twirling a staff. She can feel the spell building before it hits below, and its echo twists her stomach in irrational, primordial horror. It tugs at something deep and atavistic, straight out of childhood nightmares — the cold, slimy, incomprehensible monstrosity staring at you in alien malice from the ceiling, when the lights are off and your Baba has gone to sleep. You know it's there, and it knows you know it's there, and it's just biding its time before it scuttles down.

A curse, someone else screaming in terror. The scream is abruptly cut off.

Mama's gonna make all your nightmares come true. She stumbles over the lyrics, skipping around, but her mind is a jumble, conjuring word scraps by association.

Five paces.

Another arrow hits a rock in front of her, and she jumps over it. Keep moving. She drops to the ground, feeling for the pot in the dark. There. Right by that boulder, a flap of white — the wick. She peeks over the edge. There's a group of three templars, looking in their heavy armor like the bastard children of an icebreaker ship and a pressure cooker. They're slowly advancing on The Iron Bull, who stands at the ready, his feet planted wide, the claymore glinting uninvitingly in the flickering light. And then, suddenly, a hulking blue shadow materializes right behind one of the templars. Margo catches the glinting arc of a stylized wolf's head coming down at incredible speed. One of the templars collapses to his knees, his helmet halved in size like a crushed soda can. Blood sprays in a horizontal fan from the deformed eye slit, the liquid black in the glow of the fires.

She hesitates. There's nothing this bomb can add to the current arrangement.

Another flare of purple, the reverb of sticky horror, and a hail of arrows, flying both ways. Each time Dorian casts, he becomes a target.

Margo forces herself to stop and think. What now? Her main role is to make sure none of the enemy troops can retreat downhill. And the others' job is to make them want to retreat downhill.

There, in the bushes by the ravine, three figures. She recognizes Asher — she would have thought he'd be a rogue, but no, sword and shield for that one. He is facing off with an archer who must have retreated to the shadows earlier and chose this moment to take a stand. A rogue is skulking around them in a wide circle, trying to outflank the Specimen.

Can Asher hold his own against the templars, or does he need help? Can Dorian keep casting, or is it just a matter of time before an arrow finds him? Can Amund and Bull best their opponents? And what it all boils down to, in the end, is whether the augur's auguring is accurate and whether the battle will turn against them. And if so, when. Because right now, by all appearances, they've got the upper hand.

Margo freezes in the clutches of indecision. What will be the effect of her intervention, should she take it upon herself to preemptively deviate from the plan? Is she going to make things worse? *Think*, she tells herself fiercely. *Think*. Rationally speaking, as far as large explosive devices are concerned, there is no such thing as friendly fire. Fire, by and large, is an equal opportunity unfriendly sort of thing, and it's not like her team has any special immunity to combustion, as far as she knows. Right. Hem in the templars. All other things being equal, better stick with the program.

She grabs the bomb and makes her way towards the part of the cliff that overlooks the camp's entrance. The remaining three bombs are stashed behind a boulder, about ten paces away from where her original pickling jar of doom took flight and roasted that poor bastard on sentry duty.

An arrow grazes her shoulder, white hot pain flaring. *Move, you idiot. This isn't a stroll on the beach.* She almost drops the pot. "Just a scratch" sounds all well and good, except it still smarts like hell. She stumbles forward, doubling her speed. Something about moving targets. She'll get the elfroot potion when she makes it to her destination.

There are shouts from below, and someone barks "regroup" and "down." At that same moment a horn rings out in the distance. At least, she thinks it's a horn. She has no way of assessing how far it is, but generally speaking, horns are used as signaling systems of some sort, aren't they?

Almost there.

Margo dives behind the boulder where the other three bombs are stashed. That, and the vial of tar jello that Amund had made her take with her, just in case, even after Sera and Harding categorically refused to put it on their arrows. “What even is that shite?” Sera had asked, and Margo couldn’t do anything but shrug, because Amund still didn’t disclose what the formula was for.

Clutching the fourth pot, she creeps to the edge. The glare of the fires plunges the top of the cliff into comparatively deeper darkness. Here is to hoping that it will make shooting at her less effective.

There is a quartet of templars retreating in formation towards the entrance of the camp, where the barricades designed to keep intruders out might give them some cover. Their shields are raised against Harding and Sera’s arrows. The archer splits from the group and makes a run for the closest barricade. Right, you fucker. Come a little closer. Margo lights the wick. Three, two, one...

The bomb hits the wooden hedgehog, and everything bursts into flames, including the archer. Very combustible, archers.

Margo crawls back, shutting her eyes against the sight of grizzly death. Her stomach executes a most unpleasant backflip, and her last meal attempts to flee the way it came. The sound of the skirmish blurs. Seconds stretch into minutes, minutes stretch into centuries. When it’s over, Margo has no idea how much time passed. She pinches the inside of her wrist to break through the catatonic torpor that threatens to settle over her like a heavy, numbing shroud.

“All clear!” Bull’s voice carries from below like a gong. “You guys can rappel down.”

Did they not hear the horn over the mess of battle sounds? Margo orders herself to her feet. She walks cautiously along the cliff’s edge, trying to peer into the darkness beyond the camp. The moon disappeared behind a cloud, and the night feels absolute — thick and black as soot. The ghostly outline of flames — a green imprint fading to red on her retinas — dances in front of her vision, and she blinks a few times to try to clear it.

Then, finally, her vision adjusts and she sees them. They’re little more than flickering shadows moving up the mountain road, but Margo catches the sputter of a torch being extinguished in haste. The cloud drifts on. The moonlight glints on the metal of their armor. At least six more armored bastards, maybe more if they have sneaky-stabby sorts stalking the perimeter.

“Templars incoming!” Margo yells. “Six at least, about two hundred and fifty paces away!”

Curses from below, all three in different languages, and not a single one of them in Common. Still, she need not be a linguist to derive the general gist.

Harding and Dorian have rejoined the others, but Sera’s nowhere in sight. Bull, Asher, and Amund are already dragging what remains of the barricades deeper into camp and away from the flames. She watches the mage and the scout confer quickly before taking off in opposite directions, in search for elevated spots to occupy.

As if in response to Margo’s unspoken query, Sera materializes next to her. “Frig, right? Where’s the rest of the tin-headed pillocks?”

Margo, with a sigh of relief at Sera’s company, points towards the road.

“Shite. That’s quite a few of them.” The elven archer cuts Margo an irate look. “I’m not low-low on arrows, but I am low-ish. Got bombs, yeah?”

“Three left.”

Sera nods. “That’s not half bad. Can take out at least the first couple of blighters, ‘specially if we do it all sneaky-like.”

Right. Sneaky-like will work for the first bomb. After that, it’s going to be bluff and bluster — and a hefty dose of luck — all the way through.

Margo huddles down with her pot, fire crystal at the ready. Beneath them, the others have taken up positions. She can spot all of them from her vantage point, but from the road, it’s quite possible they’re well hidden. The templar patrol might not know how many they’re up against.

All right. Now would be the time to follow Amund’s recommendations.

She leaves the pot, crawls back behind the boulder with the other bombs, and picks up the mysterious tar potion. She dribbles some of it on her daggers and quickly turns away with a muffled curse. It smells like a combination of rotten eggs and roadkill. The stench alone is a lethal weapon.

“I’m still not putting that on my arrows. Just so we’re clear.”

Margo doesn’t get a chance to respond. Below them, she can hear the fall of footsteps — quiet, but definitely *closer*. Clearly, Sera hears it too, because she tenses and leans forward, bow turned horizontal as she lines up the shot.

Margo sheaths the daggers — the leather will stink for weeks, no doubt, not that this will matter to her if they don’t make it out of this — and crawls back to the ledge. The pottery of mass destruction is right there, ready to be deployed. She watches as the first figure steps into the flickering light of the smoldering barricade. She waits. No point in wasting the bomb on the single asshole. Maybe his friends will want to join in.

The templar lifts a fist, apparently signaling to his buddies to exercise caution.

Behind her, Margo hears a sharp twang, and an arrow whistles by. It might have even flown true, right into the strip of exposed flesh at the templar’s neck, if he hadn’t chosen this exact moment to bend down and examine the dead sentry at his feet. The arrow disappears in the darkness over the ravine.

“Shite,” Sera mutters, and Margo hears the creak of the bow being readied for the next shot.

The templar group explodes into motion, fanning out, no longer concerned about stealth. This, Margo decides, works in her favor. She lights the wick, counts, and tosses the bomb, right between two figures running towards the barricade.

The pot tumbles, bounces off the cliff’s edge, and then just plops down, breaks apart, and utterly fails to explode. The two templars jump back and then stare at the pot in consternation, before moving briskly past the barricades. Margo can’t tell whether they were splashed with the flammable mixture or not.

A flicker of purple catches her attention, and Dorian’s horror spell hits, but one of the templars motions with his arms — the gesture somewhere between a shoulder stretch and a “*the fish was this big*” kind of number — and a golden sphere bursts away from him, like a wave of sparkling static. Judging by the absence of terrified screams, and by the total lack of magical echo, the templar’s trick annuls the casting.

Shit. Right. Fire. Margo turns towards the boulder again and picks up the next bomb — after this one, they’re down to one.

Wick. Three, two, one. Please be a good bomb. She throws it.

This one has the decency to explode, and it then dominoes the spilled extract into a wall of flame that cuts off the two templars in front from the contingent of four — no, five, there's the sneaky archer stalking in the shadows — in the back.

The templars retreat a bit from the wall of fire. Arrows whistle.

A metallic clanking draws her attention, and she twists in time to see the figure emerge from the bushes at the top of the plateau, some ten paces from where she and Sera are hauled up.

The templar is huge. Three hundred pounds of metal and muscle and murderous intent, if his drawn sword is any indication.

“Keep the tin-plated pissbag off me, yeah?” Sera calls out, as she focuses her arrows on the enemies below.

Right. Going toe-to-toe with a templar. No biggie. Margo might survive this for — oh, two minutes?

“Well, look at this!” the templar quips, the sound of his voice muffled by his helmet. “Pretty little knife-ears. Must be my lucky day.” Margo unsheathes her daggers, the smell of the coating still nauseating. It doesn't seem to discourage the templar one bit. “Maybe I'll keep you for dessert. How does that sound?”

“Like a bucket trying to make a funny, you shitgoblin,” Margo responds. When in doubt, taunt.

The bastard is wearing a full set of plate mail. She has no idea where to even start — if she'll be able to get that close in the first place, considering the much longer reach of his sword compared to her knives. This is sort of like trying to shuck an oyster with a nail file — with the caveat that the oyster outweighs you by two hundred pounds, is armed to the teeth, and seems intent on shucking you right back.

The templar decides not to engage in further repartee. He lunges at her and Margo scrambles out of the way of the blade and to the right. She barely manages to avoid a shield bash — apparently the lunge was intended to send her into the shield's trajectory, which makes her conclude that the murderous mollusk really is trying to keep her for later, rather than just kill her right away.

She circles, and he pivots with her, laughter resonating from inside the metal encasement. Right. Overconfident lecherous asshole with no peripheral vision. She can work with that.

He lunges again, and this time Margo is ready for it. She steps to the left.

“Gonna make me chase you, little girl?”

He doesn't even sound winded. Maybe she can tire him out, but it'll take some doing.

Apparently, the first few attacks were just foreplay, because suddenly, the mollusk gets serious, and it takes all of Margo's concentration to dodge the incoming blows. For a mountain of steel, he is fast.

Think. Fucking think. She barely manages to block a pommel strike aimed at her head, the impact against her crossed daggers rattling her teeth and reverberating down her arms.

Then, suddenly, the wind is knocked out of her, a sharp pain spearing her in the ribs. She doubles

over from the blow, vaguely cognizant that the fucker used the pommel strike to force her to open up, the better to drive the edge of his shield into her side. Blackwall would *not* be proud.

She gasps for air, her lungs screaming as if she's drowning, but she manages to roll out of the way of the boot aimed at her throat.

An arrow glances off her assailant's helmet, and that shifts his attention for a second, enough for Margo to get back to her feet.

She's not going to get another chance like this. She moves low and jabs with her dagger, praying to every singly deity known and unknown to man — and really, to whomever or whatever might be listening — that Amund's concoction is a fast poison. And to her complete and utter surprise, her strike finds its target, and the knife slides right between the metal plates where the templar's knee joint articulates.

"Bitch!" he roars, lunging with a stumble, the tip of his sword whistling mere inches from Margo's face.

"A little help here," she hears Sera yell, but the sound is muffled, Margo's ears suddenly stuffed full of cotton wool.

She feels the spell before it hits — a trickle of dread at the back of her mind — and then a pocket of darkness encases her and snaps closed, a suffocating sack of absolute, mindless terror. Her vision goes blank. Then, as if oozing into being out of the amorphous nothingness, something fanged, vaguely lupine, and thoroughly vile leaps for her throat. Margo screams, her heart racing so fast she thinks it's going to break out of her chest, and then the thing's teeth rend her skin.

The pain is utterly blinding. She screams again. Terror cedes way to sudden fury. Wolves? Really? That's the best the sticky horror can do? The thought triggers something in her mind — and it's exactly like forcing herself awake from a bad dream — back when dreams didn't involve the Fade.

The mirage crumbles apart.

She finds herself on the ground — right next to Murderous Oyster. He's writhing in the dust and sobbing, shielding his head with his arms, and blabbering something about, of all blighted things, fruit tarts. Margo grabs the dagger she dropped earlier, crawls to the prone shape, raises her arm, and drives the knife into the eye slit with all her might. No such thing as a clean fight.

The body twitches for a while after that. When she's reasonably sure he's not getting back up, Margo hobbles over to Sera and ducks back behind the boulder. Her ribs scream with each movement. She fumbles for an elfroot potion and drains it in a few gulps.

"How are we doing?" she asks once the pain subsides.

"We're not doing shite, is how. Everyone's hauled up. At this point, it's just trading arrows. And now I'm low -low." Sera extracts another arrow from her quiver and contemplates it thoughtfully. "I think they're just waiting us out. Probably have friends coming. Frigging frig, 'cause I really need to piss."

Margo harrumphs despite herself. The moon has paled, and the sky is turning a translucent pre-dawn blue. A narrow strip of pink hugs the horizon. Just because it's edging towards morning doesn't mean Evie's team is magically coming to the rescue. What it does mean is that Margo's party will soon lose whatever advantage darkness provided.

Margo considers the last kimchi pot at her feet and then crawls to the ledge. She peeks out and

quickly retreats. The templars are settled behind barricades, none of them within reachable distance. She doesn't know whether the others are biding their time because they're waiting for reinforcements, or because there's no way to take out the remaining templars without heavy losses — or because some are injured. Or plain old exhausted. Or a combination of all four. She's only been in fast skirmishes before — never something that stretches into a stalemate. Which, come to think of it, is probably what most wars are like. Lots of waiting. Anxious boredom. Physical exhaustion. Bladder woes. And dysentery.

She crawls back to the boulder.

In the distance, the horn rings out again, and Margo freezes. Well, shit. Based on the optimistic hoots from below, that's more templars.

"We're sitting nugs," Sera whispers loudly. "We need to give ours a chance to break out before the rest of the tinheads show up."

Margo tries to force her thoughts into a semblance of coherence despite the sudden tide of exhaustion. The adrenaline crash is fogging her mind and dulling the edges, as if she's looking at the world through a thick pane of frosted glass.

"We got more blowy shite, so it's all good, innit?"

Margo shakes her head. "We're going to need something more than just blowy shite." She meets Sera's eyes in the semi-darkness. "You want to try an alchemical experiment?"

Sera's eyebrows draw together. "Friggin' no, I don't." She points her thumb over her shoulder. "But I bet the pillocks down there won't mind."

Fair enough. What did Amund say? It's a gamble? Margo nods. So. Logically speaking... She pinches the bridge of her nose, urging her mind to get with the program. Logically speaking, the lichen appears to open a stronger connection to the Fade. Her own latest dreaming seems to bear witness to that. And it should account for the difference between her reaction to Dorian's spell and the templar's reaction to the same conditions. She was able to snap herself out of it and was up and running while bucket-head was still blabbering on about fruit tarts, despite their massive weight difference. From empirical evidence gathered so far, the jello works when it gets into the bloodstream. But they don't have that option, because armored mollusks... And shrapnel, even if she had materials to make it, is not going to be enough against plate armor... But. Margo waves a finger in the air, at no one in particular. The blood lotus in her pots, in addition to being an accelerant, doubles as a hallucinogenic. What was Auntie's story about blood lotus and Orlesian nobles? Something about fumes and taking a bite out of statues?

Fumes.

She exhales through her teeth with another mental prayer to an unspecified addressee, and then she fishes for the vial of tar jello, and pours its contents into the remaining bomb. It's probably not as good as using it as a coating, but whatever chemical reaction happened to it overnight, it's already over, its properties stable. Hopefully. Now it's a matter of stretching the concoction. And of devising a proper carrier for it.

If she dies, she'll haunt the Avvar to the end of his days, out of sheer spite.

Fuck it. Let's gamble.

If you had asked Margo beforehand what would likely decide the course of battle, a *pen* would not have made the top ten. The irony feels particularly poignant — for an alleged historian, in any case. Of course pens decide the course of battles. And wars. And everything else besides.

She extracts Auntie's compendium out of the inner pocket of her coat. She hates tearing pages out of the book — the damn thing feels more like a talisman than a botanical treatise at this point. But necessity being the mother of invention — along with all sorts of other ethically flexible progeny — she locates a relatively empty page towards the beginning of the volume. It's the one with the sigil of the printing house, and she supposes that tearing out the Thedosian equivalent of the copyright is as close as she'll get to turning this otherwise mildly sacrilegious act into a subversive one.

This doesn't solve the pen problem. "Sera? Do you have something to write with?"

The archer's look makes Margo wonder whether she sprouted horns. "Yeah, a nice sharp quill and an inkwell, just right in my pocket here. Trying to write the tin-heads a love note?"

She supposes it would have been just a tad too convenient. Margo looks around until she locates a suitable wooden splinter on the ground. She uses one of her daggers to sharpen it to a point. "A love note to Dorian, actually." At Sera's cocked eyebrow, she shrugs. "I need to get him to lend a hand without the templars finding out. Could you shoot it over to him?"

Sera's eyes twinkle with amused recognition. "Maaaaybe. Proper Red Jenny trick, that."

Margo uses the fire crystal to blacken her make-shift writing utensil. "Pen" and paper in hand, she concentrates, trying to decide what to write. At least the orthography of Common matches standard modern English — which, come to think of it, is a truly bizarre case of linguistic convergence — but she still feels a wave of relief at not needing to add silent vowels everywhere.

At my signal... At my signal what, exactly? She needs to vaporize the compound without letting it combust. The smoke might have similar psychotropic effects, but she isn't willing to take the risk, in case oxidation changes the formula's properties too drastically. So she needs to diffuse it, without letting it all burn out. The timing will have to be just right. Now, where to get water?

At my signal, make it rain? Margo snorts. As life affirming as the mental image of Dorian conjuring twirling banknotes over a crowd of gyrating templars is, it probably won't have the desired effect.

Maybe she should send the message to Amund — who knows, perhaps controlling the weather is part of his repertoire.

She hesitates. This truly *is* a gamble. Especially because she is entirely unsure about what constitutes Dorian's particular skill set, aside from the thoroughly unenjoyable and equal opportunity horror spell. Unlike the Orlesian Ice Queen and her magic, Dorian hasn't cast anything remotely water-based that Margo has seen.

Well. If they're lucky, perhaps the fellow has something unusual up his sleeve.

Decision made, Margo puts her pen to the paper. Dorian seems like a smart cookie. Which is to say, she doesn't need to simplify too much. Hopefully he will improvise in the right direction.

Except that writing a lengthy explanation with a piece of blackened wood is not a trivial proposition. With each letter, the writing stick squeaks against the paper, the loathsome sound setting Margo's teeth on edge and sending goosebumps down her forearms. She has to re-blacken

the splinter twice before she gets to the end of her missive. She reads it over. Ugly, but legible.

“Need steam to poison templars. Can you douse flames with water after blast? Hit with scary spell after. -M.”

So much for not simplifying.

Task completed — and none too soon — she hands the piece of paper to Sera. The archer rolls it around the arrow shaft in a practiced motion, and then yanks a red thread out of her fraying tunic to secure the note. “We should write more messages! Wait, this’ll be brilliant! We tell Bull to flash his arse at the tin-heads. While they’re all gaping, we jump down and steal their breeches. They’re all running around holding on to their junk, and *then* we set them on fire!”

Margo chuckles. “If my strategy doesn’t work out, we’ll try yours next.”

“No friggin’ way. Let’s kill the tinned pillocks — tillocks? Tinlocks? Tillicocks? Anyway, let’s just kill them now and go. I’m starving. And I need to piss something fierce.”

Sera draws her bow, aims, and releases the arrow in the general direction of Dorian’s last known location. Margo cranes her neck to steal a glance from behind their stone shelter. A few responding arrows fly by, but they seem *pro forma*: the templars are now firmly ensconced in place, waiting for the cavalry to arrive, and to wipe her team out for good.

What are the chances that this will work?

They wait. And wait, and wait. Margo fidgets. What if Dorian is injured or otherwise incapacitated? Or if his stores of magic are too low to fulfill her request? What if he has no such spell in his toolbox?

An arrow embeds itself in the ground, about two feet away from where Sera is sitting. The elf grabs it, detaches the rolled up note, hands it to Margo, and jams the arrow into her quiver.

“Lace’s fletchings are pretty,” Sera muses appreciatively.

Margo unfolds the strip of cream-colored parchment. It figures that Dorian would carry ink and paper with him. The note is written in an elegant cursive scrawl.

“As it so happens, I do have the solution to your problem. I am, after all, indispensable.”

-D.

PS: What a delightfully terse epistle, by the way! Very efficient. I should try my hand at dropping articles.”

Margo nods. “We’re on,” she says to Sera, who gives her a lopsided smirk.

All right, then. The trick is to draw all the bastards as close to the blast as possible. She peeks over the ledge again, trying to assess the geometry of the templar scatter. She would have to detonate the bomb in the middle of them. In theory, she doesn’t even need to burn them, just expose them to the fumes.

It would be nice to not get herself killed in the process, but... well.

She turns to Sera again. On the very slim chance that she will not be dead by the end of this, Margo considers how to formulate her question without blowing her cover. From the scraps of interactions

she's had with Sera, she's pretty sure the elf would not be particularly comfortable with Margo's potentially "abominable" status. "I'm going to need to sneak up on them with the bomb." She modulates her voice to convey a slightly sarcastic casualness. "I can't lob it from here and hit where it needs to hit without a catapult."

Sera smirks. "Grand! So you just shadow yourself over there, and I distract them."

Margo makes an abashed face. "There's just one problem," she says, hoping with everything she's got that Sera will fill in the blanks, and give her at least a *hint* of what Jan's shadow trick might have involved. Maile, after all, was a trained stealth fighter. Maybe her body remembers how to do it, even if Margo's mind doesn't know.

Sera scowls. "Don't tell me you're out of showder?"

What in the hell is "showder"?

Apparently, Margo's expression is enough to convey her puzzlement, because Sera scrunches up her face into a mix of disapproval and amusement. "You know. Showder. Shust? Shadow in a Bottle? The black glinty sprinkly shite? Pish. You probably have some stupid elfie name for it, don't you? And here I was beginning to think that you're alright, not one of the annoying ones. 'Blah blah blah, Arlathan. Blah blah blah, we were great once. Blah blah, the Veil is itchy here.'"

Margo's eyes widen. Could she be so lucky? Is shadow walking caused by a *substance*? "I *am* all out."

"Figures. You know the shite's expensive, right?" Sera shifts and fishes out a tiny vial of something that looks like a very thin, slightly sparkly black powder from her pocket. She hands it to Margo. "You owe me three ales, one brandy, and a meal. And cakes. Lots of cakes."

"Void in a sack, Sera," Margo mutters, with just a little twinge of surprise at how easily she adopted — and adapted — the local profanity. Then again, profanities are usually the first object of linguistic acquisition, along with "hello," "goodbye," and "where's the loo?" "You're worse than Varric."

She looks at the bomb and considers how to transport it. There's no way to climb down the cliff — not without ropes, anyway, and not while lugging a large pot. But then again the late bucket-head did make it up here, and it's unlikely that he was doing any rock-climbing in that armor.

"Sera, can you help me with applying the *showder*? I need to hide the pot too, and it'll be easier if someone else does the... umm... sprinkling?" She hopes it's applied topically, not ingested.

"Oooh, '*applying*.' Sure, I'll *apply*." Sera takes the vial back. "Ready, yeah?"

Margo nods, and Sera uncorks the vial. The particles settle over her and the pot with a smell of lilacs and gunpowder. There is a strange, auditory component to the substance, voices whispering quietly just out of earshot. Margo looks down at her forearms, trying to ascertain the effects. The powder creates the illusion of absence — but it's more than that. Her eyes want to skid away, to find something else to land on. She wonders if the stuff can be replicated. Probably not without some kind of magic.

She gets up, clutches the now largely invisible pot more tightly, and starts padding softly along the slope.

It takes her about five minutes to walk down the plateau — carefully avoiding tangling with bushes or tripping over rocks — but then, finally, she's at a place where she can easily jump down to the

packed dry dirt of the mountain road. She looks around, but there are no signs of other templars. Either the next wave of reinforcements is held up somewhere, or they were just blowing the horn for shits and giggles.

She sneaks up the road. It's not the time for it, but her eyes are drawn to the sky overhead — a piercing, gorgeous lapis, shot through with the feathery gold of dawn clouds that catch the oblique rays of a sun on the cusp of emergence. Saying that it's a beautiful day to die is just the sort of sentimental cliché the celestial light show seems to be calling for, and Margo sticks her tongue out at the sky. *Fuck you, too.* She's not dying.

The first barricade comes into view, and she freezes. Two templars are sitting behind it. Their poses telegraph "calm but alert." Further up the road, another pair behind another barricade, and then the last two behind a large boulder. The one closest to her lifts his helmed head, looks right at her — and then through her. The helmet pivots, and he goes back to fiddling with an armor strap.

She could toss the bomb from here, but it would put her too close to the first pair of tin-heads. With a mental prayer, she walks softly past them. *I'm just a little black rain cloud. Pay no attention to me.* Right. Never a good sign when you've devolved into muttering something from *Winnie the Pooh*.

An arrow whistles overhead and thwacks against the barricade, which draws the templar's attention. Margo clenches her teeth and keeps going. The archer in front doesn't even bother retaliating, perhaps because he's conserving arrows. She hurries towards a large boulder on her left. It's equidistant from the first and the third pair of tin-heads. Maybe she can use it to shield herself from the blast.

She's almost at her destination when she hears a shout behind her.

"Rogue! Cliff side!"

She takes off at a run, no longer caring for stealth. Behind her, armor clatters. An arrow ricochets off the stone with a burst of sparks. She pivots. One templar is coming her way, sword drawn, but the others stay put. Right. No use forsaking shelter on behalf of a single lightly armored rogue. Another arrow glances off her would-be assailant's helmet, slowing his progress for only a few seconds.

Margo strikes the crystal to the pot, brings it to the wick — *frrrrrr!* — raises her arms, chucks the bomb with all her might into the middle of the road, and dives behind the boulder.

The blast makes her ears ring, but she forces the accompanying scream into a word. "Now!" Margo yells, hoping that Dorian will interpret this as his signal. She draws her daggers, fingers sticky and disobedient. The stink is awful, and mixing it with the acrid smoke does nothing to improve it. She gets to her feet and turns around, half-expecting to come nose-to-nose with the templar who had decided to confront her. The fire is different from that of the regular bombs: more sluggish, cooler, and tinged purple. The templar is on the ground — likely knocked over by the blast — but the others are all at the outer edges of the smoldering epicenter, frozen mid-motion.

They are all looking up.

She follows their gazes and gapes. About ten feet above the blast radius, something amorphous hovers, and it takes Margo's overtaxed brain a seconds to process what it is. It is... a drop of water. Except it's the size of a minivan. The quivering mass of liquid is speckled with debris — algae, twirling sediment, and a very confused and disgruntled-looking fish.

And then the water remembers that it's meant to obey gravity, and it falls.

The ground sizzles, a thick, oily vapor billowing out in a suffocating cloud that stinks of sulphur, curdled blood, and rose petals. Margo gags, but before she has the chance to worry about her unsettled stomach, the horror spell hits.

The darkness sucks her in like quicksand, and she falls, directionless, into its roiling center. A blur of impressions — too quick and too awful to process — assaults her senses. Bodies rent apart. Faces contorted in agonized screams, black tongues lolling out like dead slugs over cracked lips, eyeballs rotting, pale larvae wriggling in the eye sockets.

She falls deeper, tangles further, flails.

Things brush against her insides, trying to morph her into their awful configuration. Eyes where mouths should be, and mouths where hands should be, and teeth where there shouldn't be any. She struggles, a silent scream on her lips, but she slips below, into another hellish circle. The awful things so close now, intimate, the living fabric of the landscape she's tearing through, except it's also her own tissues, her flesh, and bone, and gristle. Her mind strains to find a lexis, an interpretation, anything to hold on to, but it fails and slips.

Beings of light and shadow, torn asunder into multitudes of fragments, eviscerated of their own essence, split from themselves, and then split again, their very nature broken and spliced, haphazardly, as if by a madman, or a toddler, or some awful, senseless cataclysm.

She no longer has the energy to scream. She tumbles down and down, into a cosmic void where time itself means nothing but the eternal agony of a ghastly disarrangement. And at the very bottom of the thing that has no end, no beginning, no up or down, only the single direction of *deeper* into itself, Margo crashes against the truth, the thing that lurks beneath her world, on the ceiling at night, waiting to scuttle down and whisper into her ear its awful crooning lullaby.

You too, my Soul. A scattered sort of thing.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Pink Floyd.

Next up: a chat with Dorian

Collusion

Chapter Summary

In which Dorian makes a most interesting discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Margo never loses consciousness in the strict sense of the term, but she loses any coherent sense of self instead, tangled, and shattered, and recombined in awful, never ending multitudes. There is neither time, nor space, nor axes of coordinates. Nothing but a world of empty forms in permanent mutation.

Eons pass.

Slowly, pieces begin to coalesce together — though there isn't enough of her at first for that to matter. Self-awareness is the last thing to emerge. Something like a viewpoint condenses, and the agony of it makes her scream — a disembodied anguish that eventually translates into a ragged sound, a choked croak at the back of someone else's throat, overheard from a distance.

A throat presupposes a mouth. And a mouth presupposes a face. At least, under normal circumstances — the beings she glimpsed in the depths of the horror realm didn't exactly bother with such anatomical niceties. Once she remembers she has eyes — and where they should, in theory, be located — she tries to open them. Her eyelids feel glued together.

Something cold sprinkles her face. Whatever it is, it has the merit of confirming that she is, in fact, the proud possessor of said face — and that the face in question is probably part of a head, which, if she's supremely lucky, might still be attached to a body. She wipes at the cold droplets. Aha. Hands, also accounted for.

She peels her eyes open, one, then the other.

The first thing that comes into focus is Dorian's mustache.

"Oh good! And here I thought you'd never wake up. I was even beginning to feel awful about it." He lifts a canteen and tilts it to Margo's lips. She takes a sip and coughs spasmodically. "That was *quite* the performance you and I orchestrated. Sadly, I'm afraid you missed Act II. As well as Act III, which, if I may say so myself, was especially memorable."

"How long have I been out?" The voice is all wrong.

"About four hours."

Four hours? How long is that? "What did I miss, then?" she manages, although it sounds like she is trying to expel a hairball.

Before he responds, Dorian loops his arm around Margo's shoulders and helps her tilt into a sitting position. Her ribs scream in protest. The world spins, coming off kilter before righting itself. Right. Gravity. Up and down are not a cultural construct.

“Do keep your head elevated. It will help with the disorientation.” He hands her the canteen, and she takes a few gulps before returning it.

She looks around. They are seated in a tent. The air smells of old sweat, metal, animal hide, and some kind of aromatic. Myrrh, maybe. The sun dapples the canvas overhead with the shifting shadows of leaves. A soft breeze worries at the flap of fabric that serves as the door.

“Let’s see. What did you miss? Act II consisted of a very dashing attack by the heroes against their somewhat incapacitated foes. There was much sword swinging and head bashing. And spell casting, of course. Very gruesome. Blood everywhere, you know how it goes. There was also much babbling and erratic behavior on the part of the foes in question, which undoubtedly made our rapt audience of mountain goats and other wildlife wonder whether they were the spectators of a military epic or a comedy. In any event, our heroes acquitted themselves rather splendidly, only to be thwarted by a sudden and treacherous influx of villains. Which, my dear, brings us to Act III.”

Margo blinks. “Did anyone get injured in Act II?”

Dorian gives her a dazzling smile. “Of course! We wouldn’t wish for the suspense to fizzle, now would we? In fact, yours truly received a rather spectacular wound to his shoulder.” He shows off a muscled deltoid, complete with a narrow slash of discolored skin where the wound would have been. “Healed, of course, just in time for the last Act.”

Margo chuckles. “So, Act III?”

“Ah, yes. Act III did not disappoint. As our heroes floundered on the verge of defeat...” Dorian gestures with his hand, as if outlining an endless army of baddies, “...the Herald and all her retinue fell upon the villains in an intrepid offensive, which, as you no doubt surmised, resulted in a brilliant victory.”

Margo nods cautiously. If she’s here — and Dorian is cracking jokes about Evie’s “intrepidity” — does this mean that the fight proceeded well?

“I take it the play had a happy ending?” Margo asks, not quite daring to hope that there’s no bad news in store. Her heart beats heavily in her chest.

“By and large, a rather happy one.” Dorian’s gray eyes twinkle with humor. “Everyone is alive. Surprising, that. Our delightful dwarven companion — Scout Harding, that is, Varric is rather *less* delightful with all his dubious barbs — and the impressively burly Blackwall were both injured, but not overly severely. The Warden, I should add, insisted on carrying your lifeless body all the way up the hill, despite his rather grisly leg wound. Very obliging of him, I thought. Solas is caring for them in the next tent over. The Iron Bull insists that none of his injuries are serious, even though he bore a suspicious resemblance to a pin cushion by the end of it. The Seeker looks like she could use a long restful sojourn by the Nevarran seaside. And our charming Madame Vivienne only suffered minor damage to her wardrobe, which, as I understand it, is injury enough as far as she’s concerned.”

“And Evie?”

“Oh, fine. I dare say the Herald did well for herself.” Dorian’s eyes narrow speculatively, and alarm bells start chiming quietly at the back of Margo’s mind. “Everyone else is alive and accounted for.”

“So... How did you get stuck caring for me?”

“Why, I volunteered, of course! I am, after all, the only specialist in the after-effects of necromancy spells.”

“You are a *necromancer*?” Margo squeaks. Whatever it might mean in Thedas, the first term her memory conjures up by association from some dusty back-drawer is “haruspicy.” Because nothing predicts the future quite like a set of fresh entrails. Unless, of course, this is well and truly death magic, but with a military application. Perhaps it involves controlling hordes of zombies? Hordes of zombies that follow orders would certainly come in handy.

“Actually, my focus is thaumaturgy. Hence my ability to displace some river water towards the location of your choice, as you no doubt recall. But yes. I do know a few spells from the much-reviled Nevarran specialty.” His lips twist in a sarcastic smirk. “I should add that I had to shoo away your shabbily dressed elven friend repeatedly — very insistent, that one, in a quiet, unassuming sort of way. And of course, Evie, Varric, and Blackwall were all preoccupied with your condition. Not to mention your Avvar associate, who offered to prepare my body for an offering to his heathen gods should I suddenly perish. I am still unsure whether this was his way of hinting at his new-found regard for me.”

Margo chuckles. Speaking of putting the dead to good use. “I think that’s actually a compliment, coming from him. From what I know of Amund, he only offers to dismember you when he thinks you’re worth his time.”

“How flattering! In any event, I promised Evelyn to inform her of your state as soon as you woke up. Which brings me to my main point.” Dorian peers at her with quizzical speculation.

“What are you leading up to, Dorian?”

His eyes crinkle, and he leans in. He smells pleasantly of myrrh and autumn leaves, and less pleasantly of something ferrous, like old blood. “Tell me, my dear, do they know?” he whispers.

A shiver creeps down Margo’s spine. Do they know *what*? About Evie? Has he figured it out, somehow? But which part? The luck vortex? Or the botched Tranquility rite?

“Do they know what?” she asks, echoing his hushed tone.

“That you’re not *quite* what you appear initially?” he offers diplomatically.

Margo represses a startle, fear coiling in the pit of her stomach. “What do you mean? What do you think I am?” She congratulates herself on her casual tone.

“Technically?”

She nods.

“Let us say ‘alive’ in a rather unconventional way,” he says. “That is, your body died and came back to life. At first, I thought you might be a spirit, you see, animating a dead body. My training suggested as much, even if your current form does appear perfectly healthy now. ‘Abomination’ is so very loaded, of course, but for lack of another, more accurate term...” He becomes animated, an expression of irritable curiosity on his face. “Though I had never known an abomination to be amused by raunchy literature, so I reserved my judgment. Imagine my excitement at the chance to examine you while you were under the thrall of the horror spell. You are most certainly not a spirit in any conventional sense of the term. In fact, my dear, I believe you might have been *human*, of all things — or at least something like it, give or take a few pesky details — which, in my humble opinion, is a rather unlikely occurrence considering the general shape of your ears and other

aspects of your physique.”

Margo is frozen in place, a chill locking her muscles in a painful clutch. She wants to bolt, but she can't, the dread at being discovered rooting her to the damn bedroll.

“Though that is not all of it! It would appear — and again, I am speculating here — that you have some facility with wandering around in the Fade. Yet your body does not have an inkling of magic. None at all. How such a thing is possible, I do not know. Regardless, you went too deep into the spell. It took an impressive effort to retrieve you safely. I even counseled the elven mage against attempting to seek you out — quite the expert on the Fade, that one, I am given to understand — which, I fear, he took as a personal affront to his skills.”

“So how *did* you get me back?”

“I unraveled the spell, of course. From there, I suppose you wandered back on your own accord. I wasn't at all sure you would!”

He spreads his hands and smiles at her — and Margo tries to process his expression, but despite the string of revelations, it remains warm. No, not warm. Rather delighted, like he's just discovered some new and fascinating phenomenon and is excited about the prospects of unlocking its mysteries. Which, she supposes, is not very far from the truth.

“So. Care to tell me who — or what — you are?”

Margo exhales slowly, trying to buy herself some time to think, but her thoughts scatter and clump together in a nonsensical mess. “I think I went deep because I inhaled the toxin,” she ventures. “I probably have some of Amund's lichen still in my system, so the effect was likely compounded.”

“Yes, yes,” Dorian waves off her words with barely concealed impatience. “I've considered it, but by itself, this explanation is insufficient.”

“Very well.” She meets his gaze. She expects to find it guarded, but there is only genuine interest there. “I'm not exactly from Thedas.”

“You're from *beyond* Thedas? Did you come here by ship, then?”

“I'm pretty sure I'm from a different world altogether, Dorian.”

He stares at her in stunned silence, and then he claps his hands with a delighted “ha!” and follows it up with a theatrical little number, where he brings his finger to his lips, and looks around furtively. He proceeds in a theatrical whisper. “I knew it! Alexius and I theorized the possibility of multiple coexistent worlds years ago! But...” His eyes narrow at some new hitch in his model. “There remains the problem of *how*. Could it be that the Mortalitasi were partially correct all along? The displacement theory has never been demonstrated experimentally. Nothing was ever published on the subject in any reputable venue, in any case. I've heard rumors, of course, but pesky research ethics, yes? If this were confirmed, it would completely upturn several established theorems, you understand?”

Margo shakes her head. She does not, in fact, understand one bit. But Dorian appears to be neck-deep in a specialized academic argument with himself, and she knows better than to try to interfere with those.

“Forgive me, this is all very obscure to someone who lacks the specialized training, I'm sure. You see, Nevarrans assume that the soul of the recently dead displaces a spirit when it passes through the Fade on its way to... well. Wherever it is that souls go. The Mortalitasi — let's ignore their

political reputation for a minute — develop much of their magic from this premise. A displaced spirit can then be brought out of the Fade and into a specially prepared corpse. A lot of this is tradition and, frankly, ritualistic behavior, in my opinion — but don't argue about traditions with a Nevarran Mortalitasi. In any event, a *spirit* may reenter. Not another soul. Clearly, this is where the theory appears to diverge from practice. Was another spirit involved in your arrival?"

Margo turns Dorian's model around in her head. The wrathful thing that passed her as she fell through the proverbial looking glass had also, presumably, killed — and perhaps briefly possessed — Maile. What had Amund said in the Avvar prison? Something about trading places with a mad god?

"I don't know for sure. I think I died in my world, before getting sucked into this one, into a body that died... simultaneously? And yes, there was a spirit." Margo pauses, uncomfortable. "Or, more likely, a demon." She clears her throat, not liking Dorian's suddenly tense expression. "But I think it went the other way, for what it's worth." She frowns. Is that thing still wandering around somewhere, wearing her body? Or did it maybe get taken down by the authorities and spirited away to some secret government lab? No pun intended...

She is distracted from her thoughts on a hypothetical Area 51 by the alchemical connection she had previously failed to fully articulate to herself. "Come to think of it, I believe the event might have been partially triggered by a plant toxin that somehow pulled me here. Apparently, through the Fade."

Dorian taps his chin in contemplation. "Fascinating. A three-way swap. Do you have the Fade where you come from?"

And then, of course, Margo is stunned into silence by a blinding flash of insight. *Could* it be that the Fade is, in fact, a truly universal phenomenon? And a collective one? Perhaps under some very specific conditions? And what would the implications of such a thing be?

Her mind churns with the possibilities. There are certainly plenty of stories in Earth's many mythologies that seek to account for the disappearance of magic from the world, usually as a matter of waning belief, but not always. Sometimes, it is stolen, typically by some trickster figure.

She shakes her head, more in consternation than in denial. Surely, there had never been a *Fade* in her world, or anything like it. She forces herself to return to the topic at hand. Dorian's question had been more specific. Does her world have the Fade? "Not as such. And certainly no magic, at least not like it is here."

The mage's eyes widen. "Incredible! Then your translocation must have required an enormous amount of energy to execute. If you don't mind me asking, who were you back in your world? Perhaps the key lies there?"

Margo chuckles. "A historian of Early Modern science, but my last project was on botanical trade routes between..." she trails off. Dorian probably doesn't need to know all that.

The mage offers her a dazzling smile. "A fellow researcher! I *knew* there was something I liked about you. And your name truly is Margo Duvalle, then?" He arranges himself into a more comfortable position, and steeples his fingers under his chin. "Your world must not be radically distinct from ours if the naming conventions run parallel."

She shrugs. "There are, in fact, some surprising similarities. We look a lot like you, for one, which is odd, if you think about it."

“So. Who else knows? Cassandra? The Herald, surely?”

Margo shakes her head. “Amund. And Solas.”

If he is surprised, he doesn’t let on. “Ah, of course. That would certainly explain... Funny, I had wondered why our resident elven mage evinced such zealous interest in your well-being. I thought that perhaps he rather fancies you.” He winks. Margo schools her face into a mask of bland neutrality, but apparently she overdoes it with the bland. Dorian’s eyes widen in surprise. “He *does* fancy you! Or perhaps, rather, you fancy *him*? So the rather nondescript... what do you southerners call it? Apostate... caught your eye? Oh, forgive me. You’re *not*, in fact, a southerner, are you?” His expression turns speculative. “Wait a moment. How *does* this work? Do you also have elves in your world?”

Margo squirms, but shakes her head. She supposes that “folklore” doesn’t count. And it’s not a bad question, when posed like that. How *does* it work?

“This question of cross-species attraction is such an intriguing one to me, you see. More so without any prior familiarity on your end... Tell me. Is it the ears?”

Margo feels a treacherous blush creep up her cheeks. She actually stopped noticing the ears — aside from the convenient way in which they sometimes telegraph emotions. The differences no longer seem all *that* relevant. Damn observant Vint naturally notices her predicament and chortles. “Now I really do wonder, *is* it mutual? What do you think he sees you as — a human? A spirit? An elf? How positively curious!”

Margo firmly diverts her mind from Dorian’s speculations, and narrows her eyes in a disapproving squint. “Aren’t we getting off track? You were interrogating me over my abominable nature.”

“Abominable?” He shoos the term away like an annoying fly. “You, my dearest, are a scientific mystery! A most unlikely, miraculous proof of a very unpopular theory! Have I mentioned that unpopular theories are my specialty? As to ‘interrogating,’ it sounds so very crass, doesn’t it? No, no — I prefer my research subjects to be willing and eager.”

Another brilliant smile. Is he flirting with her? Or is he, in fact, announcing that he is planning to deploy her as a lab rat? If they’re on the subject of fancying, she’d bet a good chunk of her meager and sporadic salary that the fellow is angling for a certain tall horned creature with a considerable sword. Speaking of the mysteries of cross-species attraction.

Lab rat seems more likely. And speaking of rodents... “Are you going to rat me out?”

“And risk you dragged to the righteous pyre by some overeager Chantry idiot? Perish the thought!” His expression turns sly. “But I do think we can be of mutual utility. Which, as I am sure you are aware, is the basis of all solid friendships.” He sounds rather bitter when he says it.

“I don’t think you actually believe that.”

“Very perceptive. I do not, in fact. And neither do many of my countrymen, despite what they like to profess.”

“So...” Margo trails off. Some of the paralyzing fear has receded, but there are still innumerable ways this could go badly for her.

“So.” Dorian smiles. “I wasn’t idly commenting on our fellow companions’ concern for you. You seem to have managed to garner some influence — or, at least, some regard — which, I suspect, will only grow after our fortuitous victory over the rampaging templars. We *are* the unlikely heroes

of the hour, you and I.”

“It was a team effort,” Margo parries cautiously.

“Of course it was, but do not diminish *our* contribution. I cannot abide false modesty.”

“Can you abide *real* modesty, Dorian?”

His laugh is warm and rich. “Of course not! A most vapid affectation if ever there was one.”

Margo chuckles despite herself. It’s hard not to like him. “So, what are you planning to do about your new... insights?”

“Oh, pester you with endless questions, for one. And, in exchange, impart my considerable knowledge of magic, politics, fine wine, salacious literature, or any other important topic of mutual interest.”

“Where’s the other shoe?”

He frowns. “Shoe, my dear?”

“The one that’s about to drop.”

He chuckles again, and Margo is glad the expression translates to Common. “Well, not a shoe, exactly. At most, a sandal. A slipper, even? I do have one favor to ask you.” His face turns serious once again. “While you were sleeping, our fearless leaders have decided that they will seek out the support of the templars. I believe as a result of this last battle, although it is beyond me to follow the particular acrobatics their logic must have executed to land on that particular conclusion.” His brows furrow in worry. “That leaves the Redcliffe mages at the mercy of Alexius, and I, for one, am still committed to remedying their situation as best I can.”

Margo waits for him to continue.

“You have the Herald’s ear, do you not? Convince your Inquisition it is a worthy cause, will you? At least to send some surreptitious help. Perhaps we will be able to sneak some of the mages out from under Alexius’s nose.”

Margo frowns, the fear returning with dividends. One giant shoe, coming right up. Dare she say, a boot? “Dorian, I have to ask. Is this blackmail? If I fail, will you reveal what you learned to the others?”

The mage’s gaze turns steely. There is a long pause before he speaks. “Despite what you might have heard, not all of my compatriots are duplicitous soulless bastards who worship nothing but their own ego and who will stop at nothing in pursuit of their goals. So, no. My request does not have ‘teeth,’ if that is your concern. But if you cannot see the ethical merits of helping the mages, then perhaps I have misjudged you.”

Margo shakes her head. It’s a sad state of affairs when she’s more worried about his disapproval than his potential to blow her cover. “I know. Dorian... I’m in an awkward situation, as you can imagine.”

He nods, waving the nascent apology away. “Accepted, forgotten. I have sprung this on you at an inopportune moment, but you *must* understand how crucial this is, yes? The sort of magic I suspect has been unleashed in Redcliffe is highly unstable. Worse still, Alexius *himself* is unstable. I do not wish to see more innocents get caught in the crossfire between him and all the other power-

grasping idiots you have around here.”

Margo nods. What else can she do? She’d try it even without the non-threat of blackmail.

“Splendid! And on that note, shall we emerge and receive our well-deserved accolades? Or, minimally, partake in whatever passes for the noonday meal?” Dorian’s expression turns sly again. “I’m sure a number of our companions are just *dying* of curiosity about what you and I might have been doing in this tent for all this time, what with all the giggling and hushed whispers. If you wind up accused of collusion with Tevinter magisters, I apologize in advance.”

Margo smirks despite herself. Fine. Maybe this isn’t the worst thing that could have happened. And it would be nice to have someone else with whom she can put her guard down. “If you’re afraid of nationalist slander, we could put on a show for them instead. Want to make inappropriate noises? That’ll confirm their stereotype of me, and deflect from their stereotype of you.”

He feigns shock, but his lips twitch in amusement. “You have a very subversive streak, my dear. I think I like it. I suppose it might encourage *some* people to take an interest. Herd mentality and what have you. How convincing can you make it sound?”

She ignores the question and cocks an eyebrow. “Certain horned people, then?”

Dorian makes a face. “Oh, do not smirk, it’s unbecoming. I am simply... intrigued, you could say. Regardless. Think of this little revelation as a peace offering of sorts, in the interest of our budding friendship. I did pry about your rather inexplicable taste in elven men, after all.” He begins to straighten from his cross-legged position. “And on that note, I do not relish the idea of your performatively self-effacing elf needling me half to death with pointed political commentary — especially not in misplaced retaliation for diverting your presumably fickle favor. Though who could blame you? I *am* much better dressed.” He winks, and Margo rolls her eyes. “In any case, let us not feed the beast, yes?”

Oh, she doesn’t need another compulsive teaser to join Varric’s ranks, on top of all the other complications. At this point the complications of her complications are having a whole new progeny of baby complications, scuttling every which way. “He’s not *my* anything, Dorian.”

The mage chuckles. “Good. Stay away from the claims of ownership. Those never end well. Shall we?”

Margo follows him out of the tent.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by haruspicy, which is the practice of using the entrails (in particular the liver) of sacrificial animals to divine the future.

Next up: Counting crows, negotiating tricky emotional waters, and returning to Haven.

Nevemore

Chapter Summary

In which Margo brews some potions; navigates tricky emotional waters, ponders leeches, ravens, and other critters; and has a heretical conversation about the nature of love.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There are, indeed, accolades, which Dorian receives with the air of someone long since comfortable with double-edged praise, the kind that hides a dagger of mockery up its sleeve. The northerner meets their companions' more honest variety with disarmingly performative arrogance.

They wander over to the campfire, where Varric greets them with a toothy grin. "Oh-ho, Prickly! Now, there's a sight for sore eyes. Guess Asher owes me a sovereign. He wagered you wouldn't make it."

The dwarf stands up and throws his arms wide with a little "give us a hug" wave of his hands that puts Margo in mind of an Italian mafia boss. She walks over, vaguely ambivalent over whether the embrace is an expression of genuine joy at her survival, or of equal pleasure at having won the bet. Likely, both. Varric gives her back a few pats, the stubble on his jaw scraping against her cheek. "Chat later, yeah?" he says quietly into her ear. When she straightens from the hug, his face is hidden behind his usual sardonic mask, but his amber eyes are serious when they meet hers. She gives him a small nod.

The next show of approval is from The Iron Bull, who strolls over to Margo and, before she can properly react, smacks her on the back with such force that she staggers under the impact. "Well done, Blondie. Glad you made it. That little trick you and Dorian pulled was *nice*." The skin around his eyes crinkles with a smile, and it's the first time in a while where Margo feels like there's no background agenda to his utterance. She also notices there is no ambiguous come-on — nothing there but uncomplicated soldierly camaraderie.

Bull's gaze flicks from her to the mage, lingering for a few seconds too long. "So, Dorian, that water trick. That was pretty clever. Can you move other stuff like that?"

Dorian's eyebrows quirk. "Such as?"

"Say, could you lift *me*?"

The mage's lips twitch in a suppressed smirk, but he raises his hand to tap his chin in a display of speculation. "Are you proposing I use you as a projectile? If so, I am certain Cullen could be talked into building you a special catapult."

"Nah. Unwieldy, and too dependent on terrain. Plus the aiming wastes time. See, having the enemy under you — that gives you a strategic advantage. Better angle." The Qunari rolls his shoulders — to spectacular effects — a calculated slyness creeping into his voice. "Catapults are inefficient for quick maneuvers. I'm thinking — broader range of applications, stealth encounters, that sort of

thing."

Dorian valiantly ignores the not so subtle innuendo. "If you believe the enemy would overlook a hovering Qunari, I think you might be harboring unrealistic ideas about your size." \Despite his sardonic squint, a blush darkens his cheeks.

"Oh, I have a good sense of my size."

Dorian clears his throat. "I suppose that higher elevation would make you prime arrow bait, but I find that you accomplish that perfectly well already."

"People don't tend to look up unless you make them," Bull shrugs impassibly. "Besides, I got thick skin. Varric, got more cups?" he waves a flask over at the dwarf.

Varric examines an assortment of dishes laid out on a rag in front of him, no doubt pilfered from the late templars. Who, no doubt, pilfered them from someone else.

"These ones look clean enough," Varric trails, and then Margo and Dorian are handed two silver-plated goblets, which Bull fills with a murky liquid. He tops off the dwarf's tin mug as well.

"Bottoms up," he instructs, gesturing with the flask.

Margo considers the wisdom of chugging what smells like pure ethanol on an empty stomach, but it's not like she's got anything better to do — or much choice in the matter, considering Bull's threateningly encouraging glower.

Dorian sniffs the liquid suspiciously.

"What's wrong, Dorian? Too strong for your taste? Want me to dilute it for you?"

"Since I doubt that diluting it would improve the gustatory properties of whatever *this* is, and it would only protract the unpleasantness, I think I'll just have to make do."

Bull nods approvingly. "Good man. Now, drink up. To Victory!"

Margo takes the shot, which burns all the way down and keeps on burning once settled. "Where is everyone?" she asks, blinking tears from her eyes.

"Well, Prickly, while you were sleeping it off, our odd Avvar associate insisted that we needed to investigate what happened to the ravens." Varric gestures uphill. "The Seeker, Her Heraldship, and the Iron Lady went off with him, so they're somewhere up there counting crows."

Right. The mysteriously vanishing birds. She had almost forgotten about them. In the meantime, Varric continues.

"Buttercup's taking a nap — after she ate about half of our provisions. Hero and Freckles are in the infirmary tent over there with Chuckles. Gloomy is taking inventory."

Margo concludes that Freckles must be Scout Harding, and, by process of elimination, Hero is the Warden and Gloomy is Asher.

"You mean he's looting," Dorian quips.

"No, Sparkler. Looting is just grabbing things haphazardly and hoping you end up with something valuable. Taking inventory is all about writing reports about what to grab, what not to grab, what grabbed you back, and what is currently in demand in Orlais."

“Yeah. Looting’s actually *fun*,” Iron Bull interjects.

Margo sets her goblet next to Varric and winces at the sudden stab of pain in her ribs. It feels like something in her side has decided to rearrange itself into a configuration that is altogether unaccommodating to her internal organs. She supposes the elfroot potion is now entirely out of her system. Apparently, it failed to fix all of the damage from the shield bash.

Varric’s eyes narrow at her sharp inhalation. “Better stop by the infirmary and have Chuckles take a look at you, huh?”

Margo tries to determine whether the dwarf is about to embark on one of his bouts of mortifying double-entendres, but he just gives her a weirdly pointed look, returns his attention to his cup, sets it aside, and then extracts a well-worn deck of cards from his pocket.

“All right, you two. Might as well kill some time. Wicked Grace? Or Diamondback?”

Margo leaves them to the cards and walks over towards the infirmary tent, trying to rein in the anxious fluttering in her stomach. She almost groans in frustration. Apparently, she can carry a bomb and detonate it not ten feet away from herself, survive the mother of all bad trips, and ingest random flora at the suggestion of a grumpy shaman-type with an incomprehensible cosmology and a penchant for language games, but *this* makes her nervous. Well, then. Maybe next time she can give swooning a shot.

The inside of the tent is sweltering hot, and the heatwave hits Margo as soon as she lifts the flap of fabric that serves as the door. She is greeted by the smell of elfroot, magic, and blood. She takes in her surroundings.

The heat is coming off a circular fire pit full of coals. The first thing she notices is Blackwall — although that is not technically accurate. The first thing she notices is a humanoid mountain of muscles, scar tissue, and hair that she then identifies as Blackwall. He sits on a bedroll, in nothing but a pair of homespun trousers of undecided color. One of his legs is heavily bandaged, the trousers split down a side seam to accommodate the bulky wrappings.

On another bedroll Lace Harding, also in a state of partial undress, cranes her neck to examine her wounded shoulder.

And then, of course, she spots Solas. Margo blinks in mild consternation, because she suddenly realizes that, before this moment, she only had a very approximate idea of what his physique might look like under all those layers of tastefully neutral knits. He is down to a simple short-sleeve gray tunic, which rather helps solve some of that mystery. Margo gives herself a mental thwack. She’s a grown woman. She is certainly old enough to be able to have a healthy aesthetic appreciation for a well-proportioned back and lean musculature without getting fluttery over it. Right. So much for the riddle of cross-species attraction.

Solas turns around, his eyes narrowing slightly at the sight of her. Their gazes do their now habitual odd little hitch, where it becomes hard to look away without applying a good dose of will to it.

“Lethallan,” he says quietly. Margo plasters a friendly smile —shoddy DIY job if there ever was one — over the sudden vertigo in the pit of her stomach at the sound of his voice.

Ok, this dance has to stop. A categorical “no” to swooning. Healthy and reasonable emotional responses from here on out.

Fortunately, Harding's greeting helps distract Margo from the viscous helplessness of the impending and rather inopportune emotional maelstrom.

"Hey! Good to see you up and about. Dorian said the spell had affected you pretty badly."

Margo returns the scout's smile. "I'm fine. I guess I missed all the action, though. Everyone all right?" She casts a glance at Solas, who is finishing up dressing Harding's shoulder.

"We arrived just in time to break the siege, but by the third wave of the sorry bastards, we were out of health potions," Blackwall rumbles, flexing and unflexing his hand as he examines a tanned, hairy forearm. Another bandage holds the wrist straight. "Could've gone worse. Without you and Dorian decommissioning that second batch, your team would've gotten overrun eventually. We would have arrived too late." He grumbles something unflattering under his breath.

"The skirmish was intense, and I could not pause to repair the wounds in the midst of battle." Margo's expression must be puzzled, because after a quick glance at her, Solas volunteers a further explanation. "The potency of healing magic wanes the longer an injury remains untreated. It becomes necessary to dress such wounds in the more mundane fashion before attempting further healing. I am, however, no field medic." He turns back to the bandage. "It is good you woke when you did. This work will be much easier with elfroot tonics." His lips quirk into a little smile, and Margo kicks the warm and fuzzies firmly under the rug. She's not even sure what their status is, at this point. He did ask her to give him some time to reflect on their... entanglement.

"The dressings are fine, Solas." Harding gives her shoulder a tentative roll and winces. "Damn templar really got me, though, Void take him. That's my drawing hand. Anyway, our field alchemist is back, so it won't be all on you. Besides, we should be heading to Haven as soon as we work out what happened to our ravens."

Margo takes a few steps forward. Someone has bothered to stack all the empty potion vials in one corner of the tent. She's got her work cut out for her.

"You're favoring your left side," Blackwall comments. "And your breathing is shallow. Ribs? Or collarbone?"

Margo winces, touching her ribcage gingerly. "Ribs, I think. A templar got me with a shield bash."

Blackwall harrumphs under his breath. "A common mistake. Made you open up, and got you with the edge, right? Remind me to work on that next time we train."

Solas turns to her again. "Sit. Let me examine you."

Margo peels her armor off and takes a seat on the remaining bedroll. The elf crouches in front of her and gestures for her to lift her tunic. Considering how much of her he's already "examined," this should certainly not cause any particular trepidation, but... well. If her breathing was shallow before...

She lifts the hem, and his cool fingers gently prod the side of her ribs. Even the bare ghost of a touch is painful. She looks down. There is a spectacular haematoma spreading across her ribcage. The skin is mottled with interesting shades of purple, black, and blue. There's even some yellow.

"It's colorful," she winces.

"There are several fractures." Solas's tone is unmistakably disapproving. "You took a restorative, yes? The healing potion should have remedied this better. It is curious that it did not."

Margo frowns, filing this new information away for later examination. Could it be that something about the lichen serves as an antagonist to the elfroot? And then, before she can ponder the thought further, Solas puts his hands against her skin and the now perfectly familiar tingle of his magic sinks into her bones. It's not exactly unpleasant, but it is profoundly strange, like ants crawling on the inside of her skin.

Her eyes dart to his face. "Can we talk later?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper. She wants to find out what is happening with Evie. And perhaps ask about the nightmare. And get his take on the missing ravens. Only this and nothing more. Just good old information gathering. Right.

He nods and mouths an "of course, lethallan." And then he trails his thumb along one of her upper ribs — presumably to check for residual damage. Except that now that the bones are healed, Margo has difficulty keeping the sensation firmly within a medical register. She shudders and looks up at him again. Solas's gaze is intense before he averts it, but his lips part a little on a soft exhale. And then he snaps himself out of it and gets up promptly, with just the trace of a frown.

Why is this tent so absurdly hot anyway? Are they trying to build a sauna? Margo straightens her tunic and glances at the others. No one is giving her knowing or smirking looks. She concludes that her little exchange with the elf was inconspicuous enough.

When in doubt, busy yourself with work. The potions aren't going to brew themselves.

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By the time she has enough botanical mass to begin a new batch of tonics, her stomach is rumbling. The sun is bright overhead, and even the wildlife previously busy nosing around at the edges of the grassy meadow has retreated for a nap. Or just gotten bored and wandered off.

She's not often alone — even when no one is directly beside her, this new life constantly surrounds her with people, a world crowded and teeming in ways that her previous existence wasn't. It's not the amount of people, exactly. Rather, it is as if the local denizens exceed their invisible encasement, taking up space usually left neutral, their attention focused outward rather than within. Come to think of it, it might be the lack of smartphones.

There are exceptions. Blackwall, for example. And Solas, she supposes. Both men share a similar quality, a split focus that reroutes at least some of their attention inward, as if both are carefully keeping something of themselves locked away, mindful not to spill it into communal space for others to see. It's the opposite strategy from Varric and Dorian, who show too much — she suspects as a kind of decoy.

She lifts her sack of elfroot, checking it for weight. That last dozen plants she dug up on the eastern side of the meadow looked a bit different from the rest, didn't it? It would be useful to devise some kind of test to check for the variation in efficacy between individual plants — and between elfroot subspecies. Minimally, to see if it's possible that some batches of potion turn out to be duds on their own, or whether the lichen really does interfere with absorption. And to see which parts of the plant contain more active substances, and at what phase of their life cycle. Unfortunately, without a mass spectrometer, she has no way of doing this outside of good old empirical observation. And without catching some mice or frogs, and injecting the poor bastards with extracts at different levels of concentration, there's no way to get anything close to reliable data. Maybe nugs could work as a laboratory animal, but where would she keep them? No, she needs something more portable. A simpler life form. Does Thedas have leeches?

Margo is tying up the burlap sack, still pondering leeches when a figure materializes next to her.

She was either so lost in thought that she didn't hear him approach, or he snuck up.

"Lethallan." Solas is leaning on his staff, a warm but slightly abstracted smile on his lips.

Margo registers the nickname. They are alone — and as far as his choice of endearments seems to be carefully calibrated, the decision to use what she identifies as a friendly moniker should be interpreted as relevant. So, no "ma'nas" anymore? She swallows back a sudden lump in her throat.

"Solas." It comes out perfectly amiable, and Margo winces internally. It seems that every interaction in this world requires dissimulation, teaching her to carefully choreograph an emotional performance that hits the exact right social note. She doesn't particularly like it. She has always prided herself on being direct. Not rude, but also not one to sidestep a complicated conversation. But now the masks snap on with increasing ease, like something magnetized. And really, it's the fact that she would wear the mask with Solas, of all people, that claws at her with an indefinable sense of loss.

"I had thought that we could talk on your way back to camp," he offers, his voice mild.

"Of course," Margo nods, and she hoists the burlap sack over her shoulder. He lifts her knapsack, slinging it to his back.

She mouths a thank you, and they begin their slow progress through the meadow.

"Tell me about Evie," Margo asks, since that seems like the most relevant — and, incidentally, safest — topic.

She catches the briefest of frowns, as if the request is not quite what he had expected. He mulls over her words. "The Herald is much improved, however temporarily."

She casts Solas a quick glance, and his expression seems expectant. "You have a theory as to why that is, yes? It does seem that we did remarkably well for ourselves this time around."

"I do. I believe the Seeker's abilities to suppress magic disrupt the luck siphon, as we had theorized." He pauses. They walk in silence for a few seconds, nothing but the rustle of grass and the buzzing of invisible insects to accompany them. "There is another matter," he finally says.

Margo looks over. There is a twinkle of intellectual inquisitiveness in his eyes, as if he is trying to solve an intriguing theoretical puzzle, and Margo smiles despite the strange emotional heaviness at the edges of her awareness. A feeling she is not ready to examine until she is alone again.

"You have discovered something interesting," she notes instead.

"Perhaps. The Herald's mind appears sharper for some time after each suppression. Her speech is clearer and less erratic. I suspect it is because whatever ritual sought to sever her connection to the Fade — or whatever had restored it — twisted something in the process. And the connection she now has is damaged."

Margo's eyes widen in surprise. So Evie's slightly jumbled speech might be an effect of a mangled link to the Fade, and not just a matter of Bann Trevelyan's shitty parenting. What is the connection between the Fade and linguistic ability? Is the Fade what accounts for her own linguistic fluency? Is it pure hardware memory — a byproduct of Maile's own knowledge — or something more specific to whatever her spirit or essence contains? Or some truly freaky case of semiotic convergence? The last possibility seems the most outlandish of the lot.

A question for another day. She considers how the templar dispelled Dorian's horror blast with his

“proud fisherman” gesture. “So, let me get this straight. Templars and Seekers have similar skills, whereby they can suppress magic by disrupting a mage’s connection to the Fade?”

“Precisely. All magic is born of that connection, and, therefore, when it is disrupted, a mage’s casting comes unraveled.”

Margo frowns, trying to puzzle out the implications. “I have seen this work to annul a spell. What are the effects when applied to a mage? Is it painful? Or debilitating?”

“It is both,” he offers, his voice clipped.

“But it has the opposite effect on Evie?”

Solas shrugs, but he smiles as his gaze finds hers again, and Margo has to look away. Some things really don’t belong in mixtures. For instance, signals. She focuses her eyes on a strangely shaped shrub ahead. It looks like a Joshua Tree with an identity crisis “So. Off the top of my head, this brings me to two possible scenarios,” she tries, because, when in doubt, analyze things within an inch of their life until they cry for mercy.

“Oh?” The smile still lurks in his voice. “Shall we compare our conclusions?” He appears pleased with this turn to the conversation. Well, whatever else they are, the intellectual camaraderie remains intact, at least.

“Did Cassandra’s annulment have any consequences for the magic in Evie’s mark?” she asks, and then waves her free hand back and forth to specify which mark she means.

“That had been my question also, and, from what I could gather, it does not.”

Margo considers this. “So the two marks” — she taps her forehead, then waves her hand again — “are, as far as we can tell, operating somewhat independently of each other. Either that, or Cassandra’s power is just strong enough to affect one, but not the other.”

“It would appear so.” He sounds relieved by this. She supposes it is, indeed, good news. As long as Evie’s ability to close the rifts — and, eventually, the Hellmouth — remains unaffected, the suppression can be used to everyone’s benefit.

“Is Evie set on bringing the templars in? Presumably under Cassandra’s influence?”

“She is. I too supported the decision. It is the more judicious choice, all other things being equal. If suppression does not affect the Mark yet remedies the Herald’s other predicament, the templars are indeed the safer allies.”

Right. On the one hand, anything that manages to dampen the vortex of doom, especially at a critical moment — like, say, closing the Hellmouth — is excellent news. On the other hand, there is the prospect of a bunch of heavily armed dudes, hooked on lyrium and full of religious fervor, joining an organization called the Inquisition. What a splendid idea. Who doesn’t like a good Crusade every once in a while?

They walk in silence for a moment.

“Solas...” She really should just bite the bullet and ask. All things being equal, as the elf said, it is better to know. The only thing worse than being spontaneously reclassified into the platonic category is to not know whether you’ve been “platonized.”

“Yes, lethallan?”

The endearment shouldn't feel like a punch to the gut — it's a perfectly nice one, as far as Margo can understand its linguistic applications — but... well.

"Dorian," she says instead. "He's figured out what I am."

Solas stops. Margo's momentum carries her forward for another few steps, then she comes to a halt as well, and turns around to face him.

"And how much has he learned of your situation?" She can't quite read his expression, but his grip on his staff is white-knuckled.

"A good chunk. There wasn't much to be done about it."

Solas turns away, eyebrows drawn in a frown. Margo plops the sack of elfroot on the ground in front of her and watches him pace.

"I feared that this would happen. I offered to locate you. I was not confident I could, considering my previous attempts had failed. And in the end, I thought it safer if the Tevinter mage undid his spell instead."

Margo shrugs. "For what it's worth, he took it rather well."

Solas's eyes narrow. "The more people uncover your secret, the greater the danger." His voice is carefully neutral, but there is, underneath the concerned tone, the trace of a hard edge.

"I guess for now he finds me too interesting — or too useful — to report me." This sounds worse than it is. "Besides, I actually think he's a good man," Margo amends.

There is a long pause. "Has he asked for anything in exchange for his discretion?"

Margo picks up the sack, and starts walking again, the elf falling in step beside her. Somehow it's easier when they are moving, and not facing off.

"No. But he thinks I might be able to persuade the Inquisition to smuggle some mages out of Redcliffe. He is worried about this Alexius's hostile takeover. Apparently, not all mages were on board with being annexed by Tevinter." Margo watches a creature that looks like a fennec fox hightail it to the copse of trees at the side of the meadow. "But I think he overestimates my influence."

Solas shakes his head once. "Perhaps not. You have the Harald's ear, and some sway with Cassandra by virtue of our shared knowledge of Evelyn's unique predicament. And, if it came to it, Commander Rutherford owes you a favor." He muses over something before continuing. "The Spymaster might feel some sympathy for the mages' plight. It is my understanding that she once was close to the Hero of Ferelden. A mage himself, if the stories are to be trusted."

There had been something about Torquemada's outburst to Evie that had felt very *personal* indeed, for lack of a better word. Could it have something to do with this Hero of Ferelden?

She steals a glance at the elf. "For a 'humble apostate,' you certainly pay careful attention to the political pressure points."

He chuckles softly. "A necessary survival skill. Especially for an apostate." Then the quiet smile is replaced by a considerably more stormy expression. "Whoever is sent on that mission will be unlikely to succeed... or to return alive." He stops, and Margo takes one more step, then follows suit. "Lethallan, I..."



She forces herself to meet his gaze. When, precisely, did she turn into such a coward? But he is the one to look away first, eyes on the sky, trained in the direction of where the Hellmouth would be if they were closer to Haven.

“What will you do if we succeed in sealing the Breach? Have you considered your less immediate future, I wonder? Remaining with the Inquisition may not be the safest course of action.”

Margo blinks. As a matter of fact, she *hadn't* given it a single thought, too busy to make it through each day to form plans beyond momentary survival. And, incidentally, summarily avoiding the possibility that, at some point, she will have to face the music and address head-on the long-term practical aspects of establishing a new life as a multiverse migrant. She considers the can of worms. Maybe it can go under the rug, too. What's one more thing?

“I'm not sure what my alternatives are, to be honest. Open up a nice apothecary shop somewhere? Peddle love potions and contraceptives to Orlesian nobles? Not a bad business plan, now that I think of it...” She chuckles to herself. “I suppose I could try to get a job at a university, though I doubt they'd find my credentials convincing. Or maybe I could go off and study Avvar plant lore in some highland village. I'm sure Amund would approve.”

The elf gives her a curious look but says nothing.

“And you?” Margo deflects. “Are you planning to stay? After the Breach is closed, that is, provided we survive that long? If I understand correctly what the Inquisition is, being an apostate affiliated with a religious organization historically hostile to magic is either the safest or the most dangerous place to be.”

His lips quirk in amusement. “For a humble rogue, you certainly pay much attention to the political undercurrents.”

Margo stills, parsing his statement. She is *not*, in fact, a rogue. At least, not originally. He knows that. And he knows that she knows that he knows. Is he trying to tell her something about his own apostate status? Or is this nothing more than a convenient parallelism?

“I wish I could say it's a survival skill, but I think it has more to do with professional deformation,” she ventures, leaving the statement deliberately ambiguous.

Solas gives her a long, inscrutable look. “I suspect that it will serve you well regardless,” he offers. “But to answer your question, I am... uncertain. I suppose I would have to survive first, as you said yourself, although our prospects in that regard appear modestly improved.”

All right. This is as good a time as any. “Solas...”

He looks at her expectantly. Ok. She should just get this out of the way. But it feels like there is a sudden chasm beneath their feet, some kind of hidden depth that, if you stare at it too long, just might flip you the bird. Still. Margo steels herself... “I wanted to ask you about the horror spell.”

Forget ostriches. Noble birds, ostriches. This is falling squarely into that particular avian species that goes *bawk bawk bawk*.

“Of course. I would be curious to learn more. You mentioned you had used a herb to alter your experience of the Fade. In my travels I discovered that ancient elves had recourse to many plants which allowed them to manipulate and fine-tune their Dreaming.”

She nods. Of course. Using botanicals to induce altered states — a fine tradition, the multiverse over. “There was a... layer, for lack of a better word, where the visions were quite distinct. I'm

sure it was all a hallucination, so I apologize if this will sound trite to you.” She clears her throat, suddenly embarrassed.

“There is nothing trite about the Fade.” His tone is rather flinty.

“Fair.” She forges on. “The other visions had been equally unpleasant. Corpses, damaged bodies, the sort of standard image of a hellish realm. But this last bit... The beings there were also mangled, but they weren’t human. No, that’s not quite it. They had personhood, I think —they just weren’t embodied.” She grasps for words, trying to capture their elusive qualia. “I thought that they were spirits, or something like it. And they were disarticulated from each other and themselves. As if scattered into pieces that constantly recombined, but in patterns that were senseless.” She exhales in frustration. “No, not senseless. Unstable, maybe, as if they couldn’t fit right. It felt...” Margo shakes her head and huffs a dismissive laugh. “You know how these things are. It felt like some transcendental truth, but it is probably just rubbish.” She waves her hand at the unwieldy thought. “Never mind me. We have more pressing issues than dissecting my hallucinations.”

She casts the elf a quick glance, and freezes, because Solas’s expression is nowhere near the sort of mildly irritated puzzlement she expects from someone who just had to listen to a tedious recounting of a bad trip. Instead, he is pale as a ghost, a strange shadow flickering in his eyes. His lips part around some as-of-yet unformulated thought, and then he presses them firmly into a grim line. His face shutters behind a neutral mask.

“I am unsure,” he offers, and for the first time it occurs to Margo that he might not be telling the truth. Or not the whole truth, at least. “And from your nightmare did you glean the cause behind these beings’ suffering?”

She shrugs, now on her guard. “Some kind of cataclysm? An ecological catastrophe, perhaps? It’s hard to say. You know how dreams have their own logic.”

“They do indeed.” He is quiet for a long time before he resumes. “Let me reflect on this further. Perhaps we will revisit it again once I have some insight?”

“Of course,” Margo responds, stifling an inward sigh. He offers no further interpretation, and so she keeps the nightmare’s claim about her own scattered status to herself. No point in muddying the waters. They’re muddy enough as it is.

By the time they get to the camp, you could cut the tense silence with a knife.

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She can hear the din of conversation even before they enter the camp proper. The entire party is gathered around the campfire.

She spots Evie first. The kid jumps up at the sight of her and practically runs down the slope to greet them.

“You’re all right!” she exclaims, and Margo barely manages to drop the sack of elfroot before being throttled by a very enthusiastic Herald. They hug it out, and then Evie steps back and gives Margo a quick once-over. Her blue eyes seem... sharper, somehow. More focused. The awkwardness to her movements has diminished, too. It is hard to say exactly what the difference is. Fewer micro-stutters, perhaps. “I mean, I knew you were alive — Varric told me — but then it’s one thing to know that, and another to see for yourself. And since you’re gathering elfroot, I guess the nightmare is over, because you wouldn’t want to gather elfroot if it looks like it’s going to grow teeth and eat you, right?”

“I’m fine, kiddo. And you did well!”

Evie grins before her expression grows troubled. “*I think* we did a good thing. Although I guess we killed a whole lot of people, which isn’t particularly good, but then the people we killed would have killed all sorts of other people if we hadn’t, so it’s sort of like stopping a bigger bad with a smaller bad.” She rubs her forehead absently. “I’m babbling again, aren’t I? I do that. Babble. I thought it had gotten better, except that it’s getting worse again. Oh, and I’m sorry, Solas, I didn’t even greet you. That was terribly rude of me. You are well, yes? You’ve had a lot of work, what with Blackwall, and Scout Harding, and everyone else, and I didn’t even ask how you are.”

“There is no harm done, Herald. The Hinterlands are much safer for the refugees now. It was a worthy cause, and I was glad to help.”

Evie smiles, clearly encouraged by this endorsement, and then turns to Margo “Could...” she fidgets. “I have a question. That I want to ask you. Can we have tea later?”

Margo nods with a smile, but her brows knit in puzzlement. “Is that the question? Whether we can have tea?”

Evie gets flustered. “No! I mean, yes, that is a question, but not *the* question. Not that there is *the* question, more like *a* question. Agh, I’m making a mess of it again!”

Margo gives Evie’s forearm a friendly squeeze. Even with the babbling, the kid does seem better, somehow. More *there*. “Anytime you’re free. You can help me with the potions if you’d like.”

Evie beams. “Really? I would love to!”

“I’ll put you to work,” Margo warns.

“Even better! I like work. It helps me think, I think. Except when I spill things. Then that’s just terribly embarrassing.” A shadow passes over Evie’s otherwise quite radiant expression. “But I’ll be careful and won’t be a nuisance at all.”

Solas hands Margo her pack, offers them both a formal little bow, and glides off, up the road and towards the others. Margo forces her gaze away from his retreating back and firmly shoves the twinge of sorrow beneath the long-suffering rug. She’s going to start tripping over that thing if she isn’t careful. What is wrong with her? She should have asked when she had the chance, instead of this idiotic hand-wringing. It isn’t like her to run away from the prospect of bad news. Just... rip off the band-aid. She’s fine with just friends. Nothing wrong with just friends. Would they even be on each other’s map if not for that ill-fated ritual at the beginning of this entire mess?

Since Ivan and Lily she had studiously kept things casual. Pleasant, fun, lighthearted — and without the risks of tangling up her roots. At most, a politely functional symbiosis at arm’s length. It had suited her perfectly well. What the hell does she even *want* with the elf? Or was Cosmic Shitgibbon right? Maybe all it boils down to is a roll in the hay, and the occasional interesting conversation. Of course, it’s nice when the two coincide — less social management when it’s an all-in-one kind of deal, but they need not to, if it’s not in the cards. Maybe it’s just hormones. And if so, surely, she could take care of the problem without too much difficulty — aside from the obvious solution, Maile’s inherited reputation doesn’t exactly telegraph “hard to get.” As to the conversations...

“Have you discovered what was wrong with the ravens?” she asks instead, mostly to distract herself from her thoughts.

Evie looks thoughtful. “Well, we did find them. They were with that big flock up over the mountain — you can spot ours, because they’re the ones with the red feathers. I mean, the bigger red feathers. And it *is* flock, right? Or is it gaggle? I can never remember this. Swarm?”

Margo chuckles grimly. “If we are talking about crows, then it is actually ‘murder.’ A murder of crows. And then if it’s ravens, then it’s ‘unkindness.’”

Evie’s eyes widen, and then she wrinkles her freckled nose in distaste. “Now, that’s just confusing. It makes it sound like someone is killing them. Or that they’re mean to each other. But then, that’s not the case at all. They were all just... flying together in circles. Very cooperatively too. Not unkindly at all.”

“Did Amund have any idea why? Or Vivienne?”

Evie shrugs. “They did, but I don’t think they were happy with each other’s explanations. They argued a lot.” She lowers her voice. “Madame Vivienne called Amund a superstitious savage. And Amund called her a *sunften slangô*. I don’t know what it means, but it sounds terribly unflattering, doesn’t it?”

Margo represses a chortle. It does sound unflattering. She’ll have to ask Amund when she gets a chance. Purely out of linguistic interest, of course. To expand her Avvar lexicon.

“So what do they think happened?”

Evie’s face is drawn in concentration as she recalls the two competing explanations. “Well, as far as I understood, Amund thinks that there is this Lady of the Skies, and she is the one who directs bird flight, and so she redirected the ravens to warn Amund about the templars. And Lady Vivienne thinks that someone had planted this odd skull on top of the mountain, and the skull drew the ravens because... I’m not sure. She says there was magic that functioned like a beacon or something like it, and which confused the ravens’ sense of direction?” She takes a breath, and continues. “Except then Amund said that the reason that someone had planted the skull in the first place was because such was the will of the Lady of the Skies — even if they thought they were doing it for other reasons. But this is where I got confused, because the Chantry teaches us that everything is the will of the Maker, and if so, doesn’t it mean that the Lady of the Skies is also confused about why she is doing what she’s doing? Even though I personally don’t think the Maker is directing the ravens —or anything else for that matter.” Evie’s eyes widen in alarm, and she switches to a conspiratorial whisper. “And then, it made me think. What if there is someone *behind* the Maker, and everything is actually *their* will, and the Maker thinks He knows why He’s doing things, but actually He’s just as duped as everyone else. And then, someone is behind that other one, and so on... Oh, don’t tell Mother Giselle I said that. I don’t think she’d like it.”

Margo stares at Evie for a few seconds. Bann Trevelyan should have his ass kicked all the way to the Anderfels — whatever these are, they don’t sound pleasant — and back for not helping the kid develop her intellectual potential, among other things. As far as Margo is concerned, nothing signals “smart cookie” quite like a spontaneous capacity for heresy.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell. So, did they dismantle the skull?”

Evie nods. “Dorian says he will help research its exact properties once we bring it back to Haven. It is apparently Nevarran. The skull, not Haven. Because that would be politically problematic, if Nevarra suddenly claimed Haven.”

“Have you eaten?” Margo asks suddenly, as her stomach emits a particularly plaintive rumble. “I need to set the elfroot out to dry, and then we can have lunch or tea if you’d like.”

“I have, but you must be hungry. Do you want me to get you a plate? And then I can help you with the elfroot, and we can have tea, and you can eat, and we can talk.” Evie wrinkles her nose again. “Oh no. That’s a lot of ‘ands’ in one sentence.”

Margo smiles. “Thanks, kiddo, but I can get it myself. You *are* the Herald of Andraste, after all.”

“It’s all right,” Evie smiles, and then looks towards the others. Perhaps Margo is imagining it, but there is something a little wistful to Evie’s expression, and it seems to her that the young woman’s eyes linger on someone. Margo follows Evie’s gaze. Varric and Bull are still at their card game, along with Asher. Blackwall and Cassandra are both seated next to the fire, eating the noonday grub. Dorian and Vivienne are crouched over a football-sized object on the ground, seemingly engrossed in conversation. Solas stands nearby, leaning on his staff and seemingly listening in. Harding and Amund are to the side, feeding two ravens with what appears to be strips of raw meat.

“I don’t mind getting it. I’ll be right back.” And before Margo has a chance to protest, the kid takes off.

By the time Margo commandeers a stretch of canvas from a disassembled templar tent and sets the herbs out to dry, Evie is back with a bowl of stew and two cups of tea. They settle on the edge of the fabric, the elfroot’s medicinal scent wafting around them in bitter effluvia, and Margo digs into her food with an effusive but muffled thank you, under Evie’s rather pleased scrutiny.

“So. What did you want to talk about?” Margo asks between two bites.

Evie’s face colors a bit, and she huddles around her cup of steaming liquid, idly poking at a clump of dry dirt with the toe of her leather boot. “It’s a terribly silly question, you know. You’re going to think less of me, I think. But I think you’ll think *less* less of me than if I asked one of the others.” She scrunches up her face into a pained expression. “Ugh, I hate words. Language. Doing things with language. It doesn’t seem to be hard for anyone else, somehow.”

That’s it, Margo realizes. This is what’s different. Evie’s self-awareness about her speech patterns, her ability to articulate her difficulties without being completely engulfed by the emotions associated with them. “Don’t worry about that one bit,” Margo reassures. “No such thing as silly questions.”

Evie gathers air into her lungs and exhales. “All right. Here it goes. How do you know when you’re in love?”

Margo chokes on her soup.

Evie’s eyes grow huge with alarm. “Oh no! I made you choke. I should have warned you that I was going to ask you something embarrassing. Except I guess I thought I did. But it doesn’t work like that, does it?”

“I’m fine, kiddo,” Margo squeaks, trying to dislodge the soup from her lungs, tears in her eyes. She wipes them with her sleeve and sets the bowl of stew away from herself. “All right. How do you know you’re in love. Good question.” What the hell is she to do with this? That birds and bees conversation is just over the horizon, isn’t it? “Is something making you think you’re in love?” Right. When in doubt, deflect.

Evie sighs, picks a stick off the ground, and starts doodling in the dirt. “I… don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever been in love. Or if I was, I don’t think I knew I was. So that’s why I want to find out.”

Ok. She can do this. The poor kid probably never did have anyone to help her parse through any of the milestones, let alone the complicated emotional stuff.

“I suppose it depends on how you want to define love. There are different manifestations of it, and different experiences.” At the young woman’s troubled look, Margo decides that they’re not yet at the stage where Evie might appreciate the idea that romantic love is in fact a culturally and historically bound phenomenon. As if *that* nugget of wisdom ever helped anyone. “I guess one thing that all types of love have in common is that the other person’s presence augments something in yourself,” Margo tries. That seems too convoluted, and not quite right anyway. “I mean, you feel good around them?” She’s not sure this is quite right either.

Evie’s expression is thoughtful. “That’s what I thought. But then that’s what’s so confusing. I mean, that’s vague, isn’t it? What if there are multiple someones who do that?”

Margo pinches the bridge of her nose. Has the kid developed multiple crushes? “All right, sweetheart. I’m not going to twist your arm and ask you who it is, but it might help me understand better if I have a general idea...”

Evie blushes, but her expression remains determined. “I know. Promise you won’t tell.”

Margo nods solemnly. That particular secret she can keep to herself.

“It’s... So we’ve been traveling together a lot, right. And I really didn’t know her all that well before, but then with the mages, and the Templars, and Crossroads. And the goats... I mean, never mind the goats.” Evie sighs, and erases her doodle with the sole of her boot. “I just feel so *clearheaded* whenever she’s nearby. Does that count as feeling good around someone?” The kid sighs again, and hugs her knees to her chest. “But then I sometimes feel a little bit the same way around Commander Cullen. So... it means I am a bad, fickle person, doesn’t it? Aunt Lucille always said that ‘inconstancy’ was a blight set upon women for their moral failings.” Evie frowns, contemplating. “Although, come to think of it, she might have said ‘incontinence.’”

Margo is glad she has no more soup to choke on. “You’re talking about Cassandra, aren’t you?” she manages.

Evie nods into her knees. “You won’t tell her, will you? I think I would die of embarrassment.”

Void in a sack, Margo thinks. And here she had thought *her* life was complicated.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by leeches, who make serviceable experimental organisms.

Next up: Dorian, Solas, and Amund discuss metaphysics; Josephine deals with unreasonable expectations; and Leliana moves her chess pieces around the board.

The Undiscovered Country

Chapter Summary

In which Margo eavesdrops on some philosophizing, is tasked with facilitating more bodily functions, and has another unpleasant encounter with Torquemada.

Also, some amazing fanart at the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The journey back to Haven is uneventful, if by “events” one means “bloodshed and other spectacular unpleasantness.” What it lacks in violence, it makes up in quiet social turbulence. The group fractures along intangible lines of sympathy and hidden tension, unspoken alliances coalescing under the even waters of military camaraderie. On the surface, it’s all amiable enough. Varric, Bull, and Asher while away the evenings playing cards — Wicked Grace, which Varric loses strategically on occasion, mostly so that the others wouldn’t pick up on his cheating (they do anyway, but let it slide). Cassandra and Blackwall chat companionably, if a bit stiffly, often with Evie as their quiet but rapt listener. Margo watches the young woman prod the two warriors for stories from their past. Even Blackwall gets loquacious, after not a little reticence and evasion. But he loosens up with a swig or two from Bull’s seemingly bottomless flask and Evie’s unrelenting enthusiasm for any crumb of information he volunteers — and from there, it’s shaggy-dog tales about military life, uproariously funny and occasionally a bit louche, but with an odd absence of specifics. Cassandra seems flustered at first, but there is such guileless interest in Evie’s eyes that even the austere Nevarran warrior relents. The one about “The Seeker and the Dragon” gets Bull to set down his cards, interjecting approving commentary. Varric watches Cassandra surreptitiously, tawny eyes glinting in the firelight, and Margo finds herself wondering whether he’s filing the stories away for future writing material... or for other purposes. Harding and Sera are gone frequently, presumably to hunt, but they never fail to return looking pleased, (though not always with any game in tow.)

The three mages circle each other with armed-to-the-teeth neutrality, and Margo reflects on how starkly different the social worlds that produced each of them must be that magic — the core that defines them and ties them together — should also be what divides them. They talk shop for the most part, but comments about auras, staff wielding, or casting style carry subtext, tiny little barbs embedded in seemingly inoffensive remarks.

The sleeping arrangements fracture along gendered lines. Vivienne refuses to share a tent with the men: “If you do not fight for your right to privacy in the mundane, my dear, you will find yourself bereft of suitable tools when it truly matters,” she tells Evie pointedly when the kid tries to negotiate the somewhat awkward decision of which of the two tents to occupy. “Besides, no one should be forced to abide the smell — or the snoring. Let the soldiers do as they will.”

Margo solves this problem simply: by sleeping outside. As they make their way further up the mountains and towards Haven, the nights turn brisk. They are still below the snow line, so the furs of her bedroll keep the chill at bay. She’s not alone in her decision to sleep under the stars. Amund — a mostly quiet but constant presence — sets up his bedroll on the other side of the campfire.

Margo notices that the tension lines creasing his weathered face soften and smooth out the higher they move into the mountains.

The Avvar is watchful, but offers little by way of commentary. The first night, he hands her another strip of lichen.

“Still necessary?” Margo asks, making the question vague because the card players are within earshot.

Amund nods. “Your wishmonger is never far.” His dark eyes fasten on her with a strange, searching intensity. Finally, he exhales on a rumbling chuckle. “The smell is weaker. Good. Keep weaving, *luzzil spinna*. Keep weaving.”

Margo frowns. “What does that mean?”

“It means ‘little spider.’” He offers no explanation for the new moniker and says little after that, aside from the demands of his relentless botanical tutoring. But every time Margo is settling down for the night, Amund hands her another lichen ration, always with the same reminder. *Keep weaving, little spider*.

At first, she expects Varric to approach her, the pending conversation still hovering between them, but the dwarf is biding his time. Madame de Fer is right — any privacy is hard-won. More often than not, Margo spends the evenings adding sketches and annotations to her botanical journal.

On the second night, Solas adds his bedroll to theirs, kitty-corner from Margo’s but at a polite distance, and she watches quietly as the elf lies supine and still as a statue, eyes full of reflected starlight. He doesn’t seem quite there, as if he is dreaming with his eyes open. Every so often, he turns to her, his expression soft and a little abstract as he points out a star cluster, names it, first in Elvhen, then in Common. Margo writes down the names, transcribing the sounds of the foreign tongue as best she can. She sketches the shapes with a graphite stick borrowed from Dorian.

On the third night, the Tevinter mage joins them, squaring off their triad into a quartet.

“It would appear that I cannot abide the snoring either,” he volunteers when Margo gives him a quizzical look.

Asleep, Margo weaves. The river bank materializes easily now, and she adds details — insects; a new smattering of water lilies; soft, feathery clouds, mauve against the dusky sky.

On the fourth night, she fashions a shack, a close replica of Baba’s little wooden shed where the old woman kept the herbs, her winter provisions of pickles and jams. It’s not much. Four walls, a thatched roof, a single window with an old lace curtain, grey from age. And a door with a lock. The furniture is sparse: shelving for the plants and jars, a rustic bookcase, a chair, an old fold-out table, and a simple cot with a woven blanket. Margo enters the dwelling with trepidation. She isn’t sure what she expects — perhaps Baba to be sitting on the chair, dark gnarled fingers weaving a basket, or darning a sock, or winding thread around a bushel of herbs.

The shack is empty, but it smells of elecampane and wormwood. Home.

Margo arranges herself on the cot and listens to the cicadas outside.

It is still dark when she wakes up. She feigns sleep, listening to the quiet, but animated conversation.

“Have you considered the possibility that she might be somniari?” Dorian’s slightly accented voice

is barely above a whisper, but the night is still, nothing but the distant hooting of some nocturnal bird to break the hollow silence of the foothills. The words reach her ears, missing syllables, but understandable. Margo keeps her breathing even and deep.

A pause follows, pregnant with some implication she can't quite parse.

"She is not a mage, Dorian." Solas's tone is carefully scrubbed of all expression except for a kind of aloof politeness, which makes Margo conclude the elf is either royally annoyed or in one of his mercurial strops. "She said her world had neither Fade nor magic, neither spirits nor demons. Whatever is behind her predilection for the Dreaming, I doubt it can be rendered in our terms."

"And if you had asked me not a week ago if the Nevarrans, with their absurd theories about the interchangeability of departed souls and spirits, might be on the right track, I would have laughed you out of polite company, too." There is a dry, crackling snap. A blast of warmth laps at Margo's cheek — Dorian must be shuffling the logs in the campfire. "And yet, here we are. A three-way swap across multiple worlds. *Multiple. Worlds.* Have you considered the implications? Forget your southern Chantry drivel for a moment."

"Not *my* Chantry, Dorian."

"Nor mine." Amund's bassy voice drips with derision. "And call me a southerner again, lowlander. See where that gets you."

"Oh very well, spare me your theological punctiliousness — this is not my point. As far as I am aware, no religious doctrine gives a satisfactory answer as to what happens to the souls of the dead. No, no, allow me to finish. We know they enter the Fade, and then — what, precisely? Yes, the Chantry will wax poetic about how they are brought to the Maker's side. I presume your people have other ideas, Solas, as do yours, Amund. My point is simply this — after a soul passes through the Fade, we lose all knowledge of it. Poof! Gone. But this, in itself, is a logical paradox. Essence does not just disappear. Nor does matter."

Another long, uncomfortable pause.

"Are you suggesting that the dead will travel on to other worlds after their passing?" There is just the slightest hint of an edge to Solas's voice, and Margo is not sure whether it is irritation, reluctant curiosity, derision, or something else entirely.

"And why not? It is a perfectly valid hypothesis. That perhaps some do — those that do not become permanently moored in the Fade, or elsewhere. From this perspective, it is entirely possible that the Void itself is just another plane of existence. Tell me, Amund. What are your people's theories on the afterlife?"

The Avvar grunts something guttural and unmistakably unflattering. "Depends, lowlander. Most reunite with their kin. A few — the ones still needed — return into new bodies."

"Ah, yes, very good, you see! Now let us take somniari once again. They have become exceedingly rare, have they not? Trust me on this, the Magisters have been trying to breed the quality back into the 'stock' for generations." Dorian spits out the term "stock" like it isn't something to mention in polite company. "With remarkably little success, but it doesn't stop them from trying. Whatever causes the propensity to walk the Fade, it is not the *just* bloodline, that much is clear."

"I doubt that those somniari who remain are travelers from other worlds," Solas retorts crisply, with just the trace of a chuckle.

“With all due respect, Solas, you are missing my point entirely. Whatever happened to our dear Margo is rather unique. But if she is possible, then wouldn’t it logically ensue that she is not the first, or the only? Perhaps not in this particular configuration, but we must consider the possibility of quieter crossings, don’t you think? Perhaps something like what our Avvar friend describes. A... what might the word be. ‘Reincarnation,’ perhaps? It would explain why certain unique magical talents reappear after generations without apparent rhyme or reason.”

Margo’s breath hitches before she forces it back into a slow and even rhythm. A vivid memory of Jake after Baba’s funeral float up, unbidden. *There are other worlds than these, Margo.*

“I am certain there may be other explanations for the phenomenon,” Solas ventures.

Margo tries to shift quietly, because all this sneaky lying around pretending to sleep is surprisingly hard on the back. She rolls to her side, still feigning slumber. The conversation stops abruptly. After a time, when she doesn’t stir again, they resume.

“You seem to be very determined to dismiss our unusual friend’s abilities, Solas,” Dorian notes. “You use the Fade extensively — and you have offered to retrieve her from the horror spell. Have you not attempted to reach her in the Fade before? I must admit I find that remarkably hard to believe. If I had the capacity, I would certainly be curious to try.”

Margo swallows back a very inopportune fit of giggles. It doesn’t help that Dorian’s statement provokes another long uncomfortable pause.

“I dismiss nothing, Dorian. My point is simply that, by Margo’s own account, her world lacks the defining qualities of ours. Applying labels that we find familiar reveals no more than the false comfort of mistaken similarity.”

An annoyed sigh follows. “You are impossible. Is this an elven thing? Because she is human — or *was*, anyway? Surely you realize there had been human Dreamers, yes? Thalsian certainly does not have much to recommend him, as far as historical figures go — unless you find blood magic and worshipping dragons a perfectly laudable undertaking — but he was a somniari, however you look at it. Being human does not preclude one from manipulating the Fade.”

“I never said it did. That being said, whatever she was before, I do not think *human* is what she is now. On a number of levels.”

What in the Void does the elf mean by that? Margo supposes it isn’t technically inaccurate, all things considered, but it does raise some questions.

Right. Sleepy breathing.

“Ah. Not human, hmm? Well I suppose this does answer another question that intrigued me earlier.” Dorian sounds pleased with himself.

“And what question would that be?” Solas’s tone is, once again, oh-so-carefully mild.

Dorian chuckles. “Oh, never mind me, I am talking to myself — one does enjoy the occasional conversation with an intelligent interlocutor.”

“All the more so when the interlocutor’s intelligence is only surpassed by his humility,” Solas retorts without missing a beat.

The effort to repress the giggles is truly Herculean.

“Oooh, not bad. I’ll concede you that one. But we keep getting away from the thread of my argument. Most pertinently, we must consider the possibility that not only are there other worlds beside ours, but that the Fade touches them in some manner. Truly, you must realize how groundbreaking this is. But if you are not interested in the metaphysical implications, let us turn to the practical ones. If Margo is somniari — yes, yes, let us leave precise definitions aside for a moment — she must be trained. Even if she cannot use magic in the usual way, there may be the pesky problem of susceptibility to demons.”

Margo shoves the sudden influx of dread under the rug — it’s a whole archeological dig under there — and tackles the emergent conceptual model. Right. Exhibit A. Consider the Cosmic Asshole. Hadn’t Adan mentioned that Imshael’s Bargain was not an uncommon formula for testing alchemists? Could it have been that he and Minaeve had selected it precisely because they were reasonably certain of its relative innocuousness in her case? Both the alchemist and the enchanter seem, on the surface at least, like empirically minded people. They presumably would not have experimented blindly without thinking of the consequences. If these somniari, whoever they are, are susceptible to demons, then certainly Adan would not have taken the risk if he had thought she was one. But then, it would appear that somniari are classified as mages — so, by process of elimination, it is entirely possible that they simply did not assess the risk correctly.

Margo’s breathing accelerates. It is a classic example of a fallacy concerning accident, but in reverse. Socrates is an animal. Donkeys are animals. Socrates is a donkey. Somniari use the Fade. Mages use the Fade. Somniari are mages. From there, the risk assessment would have gone as follows: if Margo is a rogue, she is not a mage. If she is not a mage, she cannot be somniari. Here, my dear apprentice, have this lovely alchemical formula that creates a Fade pocket and invites an ancient demon into it. Why, yes, Master Adan, what a marvelous idea, I’ll get on that right this minute.

“Amund.” Solas’s voice is in that pleasantly polite range, but beneath the carefully crafted veneer, an odd tension lurks. “You know of her predicament and have been training Margo in your people’s herbalism. What do you think of her situation?”

The Avvar is silent for a long time before answering. “The Void Charmer isn’t wrong. Spinners need training, no matter how they come about. Since you find the task distracting, lowlander, someone should do the toil.”

“Distracting? I…”

“Void Charmer?” Dorian interjects before Solas can finish his protest. “Would that be me? I don’t so much mind the charmer part, but void?”

“Because that is what you are.”

“What is he, then?” Margo assumes that Dorian is pointing to Solas.

“Heh.” Amund’s grumble manages to be amused, exasperated, and a little uneasy. “My tribe calls his kind dreamstriders.”

“Ah! Is this the Avvar term for somniari?”

“No.”

“How delightfully detailed. Let us try another approach. Is Margo a dreamstrider also?”

Amund grunts with unmistakable irritation. “Is a raven an owl? Is a spider a wolf?” He sighs.

“Your blathering is giving me a headache, lowlanders. Do you not hear what the wind whispers this night? There is much work ahead of us, and the Lady’s signs remain uncertain.”

“Forgive us,” Solas’s voice is just a tad clipped. “I, too, am curious about your culture’s interpretation of the issue. What is Margo then, in your opinion?”

There is a rumbling sound, like waves breaking over gravel, and Margo identifies it as the Avvar’s laugh. “Awake.”

“*Vishante kaffas!* For how long now?”

“Ask her. And now, quiet. I wish to sleep.”

Margo opens her eyes, tucking her hand under her cheek, and grins. “Please, by all means, don’t stop on my account,” she offers innocently. “All of this is very instructive.”

Dorian’s expression is utterly scandalized for a few seconds, and then he barks an amused “*ha!*” His mustache twitches in a lopsided smirk. “Devious woman.”

Margo’s eyes dart to Solas. His eyebrows are drawn in a frown, but the corner of his mouth hitches upward in a smothered smile. Apparently the elf can appreciate a good subterfuge. Their eyes meet for a second, and Margo quickly looks away. There is such unmistakable heat in his gaze that it shoots right through her, refracting back with an answering sweet ache in her lower belly. She closes her eyes against the vertigo of it. Well, then.

“Wait a moment, now. What does our irascible Amund mean by ‘distracting’? Solas, you are, indeed, our foremost expert on the Fade. What, precisely, do you find distracting about the task of lending your guidance on the matter, I wonder?” Dorian’s voice is a perfect mixture of innocence and guile.

“I never said...”

Apparently, the universe decides to take pity on the elf, because before he can finish defending himself, Varric lifts the flap of the tent and exits into the predawn darkness with a dramatic yawn.

“What’s with the ruckus, you lot?”

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It takes them another day to make it to Haven, and the rest of the journey is mercifully boring. Margo gets a few minutes alone with Evie and uses the opportunity to float the idea of helping the Redcliffe mages. The young woman’s face grows determined. “Of course, we must help! Even if Commander Cullen gives me that terribly disappointed look of his. He really doesn’t seem to like mages much, but surely even he can understand that this is the right thing to do. We can’t just abandon them, can we?”

Margo returns to the apothecary only to be greeted by Master Adan like a long-lost relative. The kind of long-lost relative who, before becoming lost, left you with their gastrically challenged mutt and a whole pile of unpaid credit card bills.

“Finally!” The man folds his arms over his chest. His boot taps out an impatient rhythm against the floorboards. “Better late than never, I suppose. Have you spoken to the ambassador yet?”

Margo’s eyes widen. Oh shit. She had completely forgotten about Lady Montilyet’s summons. Oh dear unspecified deity, how long has it been?

“Of course you haven’t. Now go, before I have a revolt on my hands. Do I look like I should cater to the ridiculous whims of Orlesian nobles? No? Good. Because I’m not dealing with this shit, Void take them all.”

Margo winces. “Is there anything in particular they want?”

Adan throws his hands up in frustration. “What part of ‘not dealing with this shit’ was unclear, apprentice?” Another string of colorful profanities graces her ears. “Here. You haven’t been eating again — soon you’ll be able to hide behind a broomstick if you continue in that vein. I have better things to do than to dispose of your starved remains. I set aside some stew for you when I thought you lot were back. Eat. And then, off you go!”

All things being equal, Margo decides that submitting to the chain of command is sound strategy. She scarfs down the cold, partially congealed soup — it tastes like soggy cardboard — and hurries to the chantry.

Josephine, in a striking purple brocade dress, greets her with a radiant — if slightly pinched — smile.

“Oh agent! It is very good to see you. Leliana has informed me of the Herald’s progress in the Hinterlands — we are all so relieved to hear of the overall success of the operation. The timing could not have been better. We have several visitors from Orlais joining us in Haven within the week.” She clasps her hands in front of her. “And on this subject, I was hoping I could request a favor. Master Adan mentioned you may be more amenable to these matters. You were raised by a... hedgewitch, is that right?”

Margo cocks her head and makes a noncommittal noise. This is going nowhere good.

“You see, I may have mentioned once or twice that our accommodations in Haven are, overall, somewhat lacking. We want to make our visitors comfortable, especially in anticipation of a protracted stay. There are certain things that Orlesian apothecaries have on offer that a military operation might overlook, you understand.”

Margo smiles politely. What Orlesian bodily function is she going to have to facilitate this time?

Josephine’s smile becomes tense. She casts a quick glance around, notices the presence of the Chantry mother — the very same Chantry mother Evie did not want informed of her heretical tendencies — and grasps Margo’s elbow.

“Agent, would you step into my office? Perhaps we could have some tea, and I will explain in more detail?”

“Of course,” Margo smiles. “Lead the way, ambassador.”

About fifteen minutes and two cups of excellent oolong later, Margo has a list of five formulas. She quickly looks through Auntie’s tome to identify them. Unsurprisingly, there is an aphrodisiac, an abortifacient, and a fertility inhibitor. The fourth formula is a deodorizing agent. And the last one promises to remove excess hair. Margo reads the addendum to that one: “Do not apply the paste too close to your unmentionables. Burns like a rage demon’s ass, it does.” She hopes that her expression remains appropriately bland.

“Please, do let me know which ingredients might be lacking. Most of these are terribly overpriced when acquired ready-made, and our financial resources are still somewhat overextended. But making the medicines available to our guests would be of great help, I am sure.”

Bootleg birth control. Better yet, bootleg deodorant. Maybe she can sprinkle everyone with it — the latter, not the former. Margo nods. All in all, very useful.

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Upon her exit from the chantry, Margo's day takes a resolute turn for the worse. Torquemada materializes in front of her like some particularly malevolent jack-in-the-box, her narrow face morphing through three different expressions before it settles into the carnivorously inclined one — which, Margo supposes, is what passes for interested as far as Comrade Nightingale is concerned.

"Spymaster. How may I be of help?"

"Agent. I hear you made yourself marginally useful to your team during your travels in the Hinterlands. Do you fancy a walk?"

Margo stills. The tone is all wrong. It is almost friendly. The woman's voice is melodic and a little saccharine. The steel is still there, in the background, but it is all wrapped up in velvet, with a little bow on the side to make it look especially inoffensive. Margo's not buying that bridge.

"Of course."

They stroll at a casual pace.

"You are no doubt aware that our Qunari friend is an agent of the Ben-Hassrath, yes?"

Torquemada asks in a studiously conversational tone. She might as well be commenting on Bull's preference for strong spirits. "Of course you are. In any event, so far the association has proven useful. Upon your group's return to Haven, he passed on some interesting documents that just happened to have come into his possession — such a fortuitous and timely turn of events! If I were a more suspicious woman, I might have concluded that he had them in his possession all along, waiting to decide what to do with them — but that would be much too ungenerous towards our prospective allies, don't you think?" Leliana trills a delighted little laugh, and Margo shudders internally. Dear merciful universe but the Spymaster is creepy.

Leliana stops, and Margo follows suit.

"Tell me, agent. How long have you been sporting this Nevarran identity now? A little over a month, yes?"

Had it been that long since she arrived? Margo supposes that it is about right. Not that she's sporting anything, Nevarran or otherwise, but she is not about to disabuse Torquemada of that notion.

"And not once have I seen you break from the persona. That does take... dedication." The woman rifles through her coat, before extracting a folded letter. "As luck would have it, this pertains to you." She hands Margo the sheet of folded paper.

Margo congratulates herself on the fact that her hands tremble only slightly. She unfolds the paper and tries to make sense of the prissy scroll.

Dearest,

I have considered the case of your little protégée. An interesting girl, not without talent, and an elf besides. I will grant you, she is easy on the eyes. The scars will need to be worked on, of course, that kind of physical flaw can be made interesting in our profession, but not so easily for a woman.

You tell me she is skilled in other ways. I haven't had the pleasure, but in itself that is hardly sufficient. If you wish me to take her on as a project, she will need more than to sneak into my bedchamber. That is not much of an achievement, as I am sure you are aware — I do go to great lengths to make the place very easy to breach. Although stealing my bird and setting it to terrorize the castle was an amusing touch.

I can imagine you are mounting a protest — allow me to assuage your anxiety. I am not opposed in principle — the fact that she is an elf and has some knowledge of the Dalish but yet is not one of them can be politically expedient. In these times especially. But a bard's skills aren't simply those of a spy or a courtesan. You tell me she has a pleasant enough singing voice and that she acquits herself well in stealth. It is a start, but does she have the potential for The Game?

Here is my offer. If she can manage to do something to truly capture my attention, I will consider your request, and will arrange for her training. Until then, enjoy her undoubtedly delightful company.

Your faithful friend (though do not think I have forgotten our little tryst on that terribly uncomfortable settee)

-M.

Margo blinks. First of all, who in the Void is “M”? And second, is there anyone her “gently used” host body hasn’t previously banged?

“You are surprised?” Torquemada quips. “I had so hoped you would shed light on this fascinating missive. I wonder, could this “M” be Lady Mantillon? If so, to capture the attention of The Dowager — even ever so perfunctorily — is no small feat. You must have had a truly powerful protector. Who was it?”

When Margo fails to respond, Torquemada plucks the letter from her hands, folds it, and tucks it away. “It does explain some of the burning questions that annoyed me so since our acquaintance. Your little stunt with that Tevinter mage was no doubt a last-ditch gambit to impress your masters and to perhaps secure the training you coveted. A bard’s life is a dangerous one, but it does open doors, especially for an elf. Let us theorize that your allegiance to Charter had begun to chafe: if so, then perhaps you were looking for a way out. A plausible escape route.”

Margo says nothing.

“Silence, hmm? Golden, isn’t it. Times have changed, agent. Your allegiance is to the Inquisition now. But I do not disagree with this missive’s mysterious author’s assessment — you do have a certain... potential. Whether that potential can be of service to us remains to be seen. You were helpful in the Hinterlands, I was told. If you wish to try on a bard’s life in earnest, I could offer you the chance to do just that.”

Margo signals to her face to take on a politely interested expression. Whether she succeeds is anyone’s guess, but it doesn’t really matter. Torquemada is on a roll.

“The Herald came to see me this morning with an impassioned plea to help the Redcliffe mages. Cassandra and Cullen both insist that we should recruit the Templars — they were quite impassioned as well, I should add. Josephine is undecided. Tell me, agent. What would you have me do to break this stalemate?”

“Aid the Templars,” Margo responds without hesitation.

Torquemada cocks a perfectly tweezeed eyebrow. “Interesting. And what of the mages then?”

Margo knows exactly where this is headed. If she had ever doubted there had been a script, she no longer does. Torquemada has maneuvered her where she wanted her. “We should send people to investigate what is happening in Redcliffe.” The line sounds rehearsed.

Leliana smiles. It’s not pleasant. “That Dorian. Charming, isn’t he? And persuasive, I take it.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. At this point, Margo just wants to get this over with. “Yes, and very well dressed! Not to mention that he makes a valid point about Tevinter’s potential involvement and the necessity to learn more information on that subject.”

Torquemada trills her twinkling little laugh and claps her hands. “A spine, agent! What a delightful discovery! Ah yes. I think you will do quite well. As a matter of fact, I have just the team in mind. The Qunari is a spy, so his experience will be valuable, as will that of the Tevinter mage. Solas, I should add, followed on the Herald’s heels and volunteered his help should we decide to mount a rescue mission. It does not surprise me that his sympathies should fall with the mages, of course. And I suppose we could spare him for now, while the Herald’s mark is mercifully stable.”

Margo swallows. “Anything else, Spymaster?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. Our spies report that Redcliffe is about to shut down. By the time we are ready, the only way for your group to enter will likely be as a traveling minstrels.”

Margo almost chokes on that. Surely, Torquemada is making a funny?

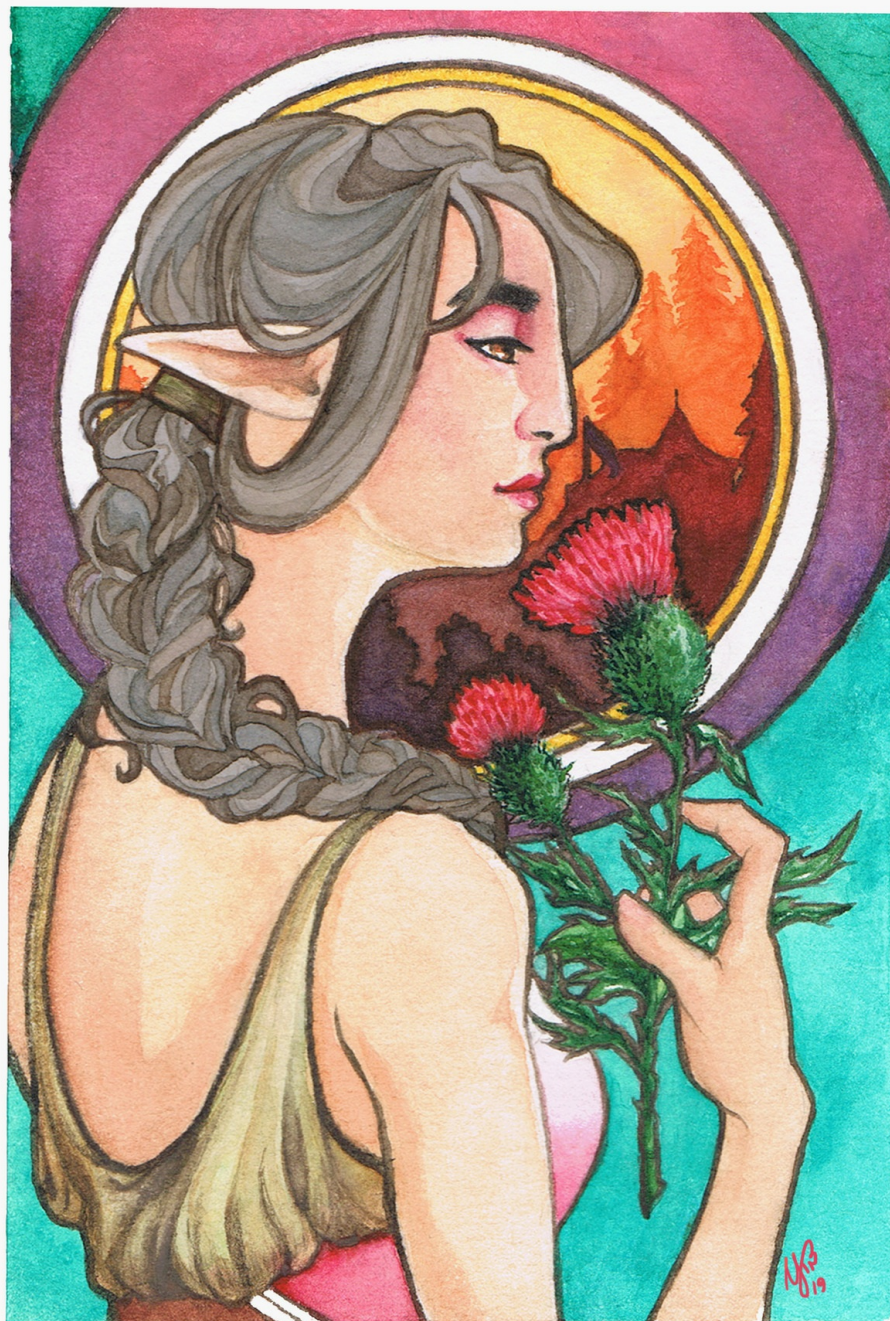
Indeed, Leliana’s voice is mocking. “You wanted to try the profession on for size? Here is your opportunity. And if you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask. I was a bard once, you know — perhaps I could offer some insights.”

Yippee ki-yay.

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**Some art!** The amazingly talented @horizonproblems gifted me with this absolutely stunning watercolor portrait of Margo. I highly recommend [checking out their art](#), it is absolutely beautiful.





## Chapter End Notes

Lovely readers, thank you for following, for reading, and for leaving me your thoughts. Thank you, also, for being so patient with me, as the updates on both Vol 1 and Vol 2 have slowed. We're in a bit of a holding pattern at the moment -- work and RL and what have you. The project is not abandoned, but I'd rather not make promises about update schedules that I can't keep. Either way, I appreciate your patience and your reading eyes. <3

Since the DA fandom is absurdly talented and stunningly prolific, I'm sure you are not jonesing too much for new content, since there's plenty to choose from, but just in case you're looking for something a bit similar to what RAGT provides (i.e. a predilection for grimdark realism combined with somewhat off the wall humor and a healthy dose

of philosophizing disguised as narrative), I have a little side project of the "modern" character in [crapsack world] variety I've been working on for TES (The Elder Scrolls). Feel free to check it out if you feel so inclined: it can be found here: [Always Read the Fine Print](#). That one is flash fiction and unbeta-ed, so it updates pretty frequently.

# Bread and Circuses

## Chapter Summary

In which Margo talks shop with Varric, and encounters a string instrument.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

On a normal day, the alchemical work would absorb Margo's attention, but there is nothing particularly normal about a day where you discover that your body's previous occupant had been taking active steps towards becoming a bard-assassin-spy-possibly-moonlighting-as-a-courtesan.

Margo moves through the motions of assembling the five formulas Josephine requested, muttering under her breath the whole time. She catches herself codeswitching wildly — bits of her mother tongue mixing in with Thedosian insults she picked up along the way. Fortunately, there is no one to hear her — Adan hightailed it out of the shop the second she was back with her new assignment. The apothecary has the ingredients for everything but the hair removal paste — they are missing the base for the poultice, which requires the subcutaneous back fat of a creature called a *snoufleur*. She wonders whether beast looks like a giant snuffling cauliflower.

Only a vague twinge of guilt accompanies Margo appropriating a portion of the concoctions for herself — at least in the case of the deodorant, she figures that appropriation can be interpreted as a common good. Margo stares at the abortive with vague unease. Her sense of elven biology is approximate at best, but she has not gotten her period — and it has been over a month. She swallows back a sudden lump in her throat. Ah, fuck, when did Maile have her little escapade with that Tevinter mage, exactly? Surely she couldn't be pregnant. Surely Maile would have been careful.

*Oh Maile, you poor, stupid girl.* What sort of shit life do elves have around here that fucking, killing, and singing her way through the social hierarchy seemed to her like the best possible option? Void in a sack.

Margo lifts her shirt and stares at her stomach. It's flat, all lean muscles and old, healed injuries. The horizontal scar has gone from pink to white. It is possible that elves have different cycles. Or that she can't get pregnant. She releases her shirt and lets her face drop into her hands. Right. No hand-wringing. It's not like she can run over to a local pharmacy and get a home pregnancy kit. She needs to find a healer — preferably the Thedosian version of a midwife — get herself looked at, and go from there. Mutely agonizing over it won't do her much good.

Margo stacks the physics into the designated crate after labeling them, adds a request for snoufleur fat, pulls on her coat, and wanders outside into the brisk Haven afternoon. Before fleeing Torquemada's enchanting company, she had been ordered to report to Bull, since he was designated lead on their little operation. But in the complex choreography of the Inquisition leadership's political maneuvering, they have been given two days to rest and prepare. Bull can wait. She isn't sure she is quite ready to face him. After all, he's known about Maile's bardic aspirations the entire time — Torquemada was certainly not idly seeding the idea that the Qunari had been sitting on the letter like a particularly malevolent chicken, incubating it until the time it became politically expedient for him to reveal it.

Her legs carry her past Solas's hut, and she hesitates for only a moment before marching on, precisely because the impulse to knock on his door is so strong her hands are practically aching with it.

Men. Buses. Elves. No running.

The decision to seek out Varric isn't really one in the strict sense of the term. It is more that Margo finds herself walking towards his tent with all the intentionality of a mindless automaton suddenly freed from its habitual rails and set to roam the countryside. She finds him out front, chatting with a Chantry sister who is clasping a book to her unmistakably heaving bosom and practically bouncing up and down in the slushy snow. Varric looks vaguely flattered, but wary.

"Varric?" Margo calls out, to give everyone enough time to adjust.

"Prickly!" If she didn't know any better, she would think that Varric is distinctly relieved by her arrival. "You're just in time. Thanks for stopping by."

Margo frowns briefly, and then forces her lips into a smile. Apparently the dwarf is adopting the time-tested strategy of extracting oneself from an awkward social situation by simulating a pre-existing appointment.

"I should probably go," the Chantry sister volunteers tentatively.

"Sure, Sister. I'll catch you later."

The woman walks away with a brief glance at Margo.

"Admirer?" Margo asks.

Varric shakes his head and groans. "Worse, Prickly. An aspiring auteur. Wants me to introduce her to my editor."

Margo grins, this time in earnest. "What does she write?"

Varric just shrugs. "What they all write. It's all a variation on the same damn theme. Templar falls in love with a mage. Mage falls in love with a Templar. They are misunderstood and persecuted. They cannot be together, because plot. When they finally are, lots of florid details about the size and shape of his manhood and where it gets inserted. Worst part? This shit actually sells."

Margo pats Varric on the shoulder and clucks sympathetically. "Not everyone can write a Tethras. Be generous."

"True enough. And speaking of thickening plot, I have a few things I've been meaning to run by you. And I figured you might want to chat, too, what with your new assignment. Bard, heh?" Varric's amber eyes settle on her, and Margo notices, not for the first time, that the dwarf's gaze is nothing if not shrewd.

"I would love a chat, Varric."

He nods. "Step into my office." He gestures ironically at his tent.

Margo hesitates at the entrance, the mild dazzlement akin to the disorientation so often depicted in fairy tales: that moment when the protagonist spies, through a keyhole, a world that operates according to an entirely new set of rules. The inside of the tent is redolent with color. Rich burgundy and warm ocher swirl and twine into complex geometrical patterns on a wide woven rug.

A low desk, littered with letters and reams of paper, is tucked into a corner, next to a brazier lit with the glowing arabesques of fire runes. Several sturdy, iron-shod trunks double as benches, their lids covered in thick furs for comfort and warmth. The only concession to austerity is Varric's cot — narrow and squat, with a simple wool blanket and a single, thin pillow.

She isn't sure why she didn't expect the books. Perhaps it isn't the books, exactly, but rather their sheer volume and diversity. Over the last month, Varric has somehow managed to assemble a small but incredibly well-stocked collection. Not just his novels, either — everything from history to theology to philosophy. Art. Plays. Political pamphlets. Poetry. Margo whistles, taking in the wealth of literature.

"Varric, I know we've only known each other for a short time, but can I move in with you?"

He chuckles. "I'd suggest you start with buying me dinner."

"Dinner, drinks, a pet nug — whatever will get me into your library," Margo trails, still captivated by all the spines. He even has an entire shelf dedicated solely to alchemy and botany.

This time, the dwarf's laugh is full-throated and surprisingly genuine. Margo looks at him with a grin. His mirth is infectious. "I know how this goes, Prickly. You only want me for my books."

"And your scintillating company," she retorts, turning back to the shelves. Oooh, a omnibus on the lyrium trade!

"I'm flattered, I truly am. But I prefer my roommates a bit more... ahh... substantial."

"Ah, I see. A stout dwarven woman, perhaps?"

He chortles. "Not necessarily dwarven. See, Prickly, it's all about where a character is positioned in a story — some people, no matter how far from the action they stand, just draw lightning. Not their fault, really, but I've been around long enough to spot trouble when I see it. Besides, I'm pretty sure your attention isn't exactly on yours truly, much as it breaks my heart. Anyway, speaking of stout, what in the Void is happening to you? I know you do eat, but..."

Margo frowns. Is it that bad? Her clothes do seem to fit a little more loosely lately, but nothing quite so dramatic — at least, nothing that should warrant two comments about her weight in one day.

"A growth spurt," she parries, still keeping the smile on her face, even if the expression fits askance.

"Spoken to Chuckles about it? You might have a worm. Seen it plenty in Kirkwall, especially in Lowtown."

She shakes her head. A worm, perhaps not. But a parasite of the cosmic variety? Dear Unspecified Deity's Nether Regions, is there a physical component to Imshael's attention beyond vomiting blood?

Time to add an exorcist to her medical team. "Back to books. Can I borrow something?"

Varric narrows his eyes. "Sure, Prickly. What would you like?"

Margo considers her most immediate needs. "Something on the political history of Thedas."

Varric gives her another one of his quizzical looks, turns to the bookshelf, and extracts a huge

doorstopper of a tome. “How about a Genitivi? The upside with this one is that you could use it as a blunt-force instrument in a pinch. Oh. And while I like you, Prickly, if you scribble on it, you’ll lose your borrowing privileges.”

“Understood.” Margo receives the book with barely contained greed and tucks it away into her pack. He gestures for her to sit, and she lowers herself to the chair he indicates. He plops down opposite her with a sigh.

“So. The Herald.”

Margo nods. They are down to business — in other words, Evie. She had no doubt whatsoever that this was what Varric had been meaning to talk to her about. Evie and the seemingly improved luck siphon. And yet, she cannot help but wonder why he has decided to approach her of all people — and not, say, Cassandra. Or Solas, for that matter.

“It seems that it has gotten better,” Margo ventures cautiously.

Varric nods thoughtfully. “It has. Not completely — I still got misfires — but the fights weren’t slapstick-awful. So let’s file that away as a win. See, Prickly, that’s not the problem.”

Margo frowns. “What’s the problem then?”

The dwarf’s eyes narrow. “You haven’t spoken to Chuckles about it, have you?”

She shakes her head. “He hasn’t mentioned anything other than the improvement.”

“You two had a falling out?”

Margo keeps her face neutral at first, but then the air rushes out of her. She slumps a little. “Not exactly. To be fair, Varric, I don’t believe there was ever anything to fall out of.” It’s a creative bending of the truth, at least as far as her own emotional climate is concerned, and she has no doubt that Varric knows this perfectly well.

The dwarf chortles, but the sound bears only a passing resemblance to genuine amusement. And then his expression turns serious, and perhaps slightly sad. Margo has the sneaking suspicion that this is an affective undercurrent that his habitual sarcastic mask is designed to conceal. “Ah. Well, shit. No wonder he seemed a bit distracted lately. I suppose I can’t blame him for not noticing.”

A very unpleasant chill creeps down Margo’s spine. “Varric, out with it. What’s going on?”

The dwarf sighs, and props his elbows on his knees, gaze trained on the elaborate rug on the floor. “Have you taken a good look at Ca—... the Seeker lately?”

Margo blinks. She and Cassandra haven’t really interacted much beyond the simple formalities of camp life and traveling together. Margo tries to summon a recent memory of the warrior. She seemed... tired, perhaps, but all of them were road-worn by the time they got back to Haven.

“Anything specific I should have noticed, Varric?”

“It’s draining her, Prickly,” the dwarf says simply. “Whatever ability she uses to knock out Evie’s curse — or whatever that thing is — it’s leeching something. Not sure if it’s because the Seekers don’t use lyrium like the Templars do, so their little suppression trick has to come from elsewhere, or if it’s something about Evie’s blighted luck siphon, but by the time we made it to the Templar base camp, she was barely walking. That’s why Hero took so much damage. He was making sure he drew all the attention.” Varric sighs. “Hero’s a bit gruff around the edges, but he’s not stupid.



He notices these things.”

Margo digests this. Of course. Why didn't she think that there would be a cost? Magic, of whatever persuasion, does not manifest ex nihilo — this much has been obvious from the mages' reliance on lyrium potions to sustain their casting in battle. Or from the Templars' use of the stuff, for that matter. Why was she operating under the assumption that similar principles did not apply to Cassandra's abilities to suppress magic?

“So, the solution isn't sustainable in the long term,” Margo concludes. She meets Varric's gaze, noticing the worry creases that bracket his mouth. He averts his eyes and stares at the rug at his feet like it's about to reveal the secret to the universe. “You're worried about Cassandra, but if we bring others into it — namely, the Templars, the only other ones able to suppress magic — this exposes Evie. And makes the whole situation a political...ah... gaatlok keg, waiting to blow.” Margo's voice is gentle veering towards conciliatory, because for a moment Varric looks uncharacteristically vulnerable. She smothers the impulse to throw her arms around the sarcastic bastard and lie through her teeth that it'll all be fine in the end. No point in insulting the dwarf's intelligence. Instead, she leans forward and gives his forearm a brief squeeze.

“Damn it, Prickly. The Seeker is never going to admit weakness — she'll run herself into the ground before that happens. And while she and I haven't exactly gotten along, at least she can be reasoned with. She's got a soft streak deep down beneath all that steel and duty. Which is more than I can say about some of the other Inquisition founders.”

“So this is all just worry about the balance of power?” Margo asks. Oh, look — another bridge for sale!

Varric makes a face. “Yeah, yeah, don't gloat. If you breathe any of this to her, I will write you into a romance with Seggrit in my next book.”

Margo makes a suitably horrified face, but she's quietly glad that Varric seems to be regaining his balance. The vulnerable look fits him poorly. “So we need a new solution,” she states with confidence she doesn't feel.

“Yep.” Varric looks up from the floor and leans back in his chair. “That we do.” He smothers the worry under another layer of quiet irony, his gaze turning wry once again. “All right. Enough wallowing. At least if there is any trouble with recruiting the Templars, Evie can just run up and hug them all. They won't know what hit them. Now. Drinks?”

“Varric, wait. I want to ask for your advice.”

He offers her a slightly crooked smile. “Worst vice is advice, but I'm always happy to make a suggestion.”

Margo exhales. How does she handle this? “I know nothing about being a bard. And what I might have known at one point, I do not remember.”

“Memory still faulty?” the dwarf asks with a little twinkle in his eye.

Margo just shrugs. “Still faulty. Nor do I entirely trust Leliana's sudden enthusiastic endorsement. It feels like... she's trying to stage something.”

“All right. Run that conversation by me.”

She does. After she is finished, Varric nods slowly. He scrapes the palm of his hand against the stubble on his chin with a sound like sandpaper on wood. “From a tactical perspective, it's a win-

win for the spymaster. She would've sent someone to check out Redcliffe regardless. I'm pretty sure the decision to help the Templars was a done deal the second the Seeker and Curly united on the issue. Ruffles might have been on the fence, but that's diplomacy for you — you hedge your bets and speak out of both sides of your mouth."

"Does Evie's voice not carry weight?"

The dwarf bobbles his head from side to side, the movement neither affirmative nor negative.

"Look, Prickly. Here's what you need to know. When you get right down to it, the Inquisition boils down to the late Divine's two Hands. Everyone else is auxiliary."

Right. Divine Justinia — the cleric who got blown up in the Chantry — and her two advisors. So, Cassandra and Torquemada.

"All right. I get that." Margo sighs. "But why send *me*?"

"At a guess? Because you're an unknown variable, and the Nightingale doesn't like unknown variables. Trust me on that — I've been on the wrong end of her attention, too. On the wrong end of both Hands, as a matter of fact. Not a comfortable place to be." He rubs his wrist absentmindedly. "But it's not just about you. Have you noticed who else is going?"

Margo checks off the candidates. The Iron Bull — a self-confessed Qunari operative. Solas, an apostate elven mage. And Dorian.

"She's sending all the wild cards out," Margo finally concludes.

"If you make it back with interesting information, great. And if you don't make it back..." Varric shrugs.

Margo pinches the bridge of her nose and squeezes her eyes shut. The logic is suspiciously reminiscent of how the religiously minded folks of Salem determined whether someone was a witch. Toss the witch in the water: if she drowns, she was innocent. Win-win indeed.

"What of this strange decision to send us as minstrels?" Margo shakes her head. "Is she... taking the piss?"

Varric chortles. "You know what, Prickly, the less I think about what the Nightingale might find humorous, the better I sleep at night. But if you're going to play the role, here's a suggestion. Trust me, I'm a storyteller. Not that different from a bard, if you think about it." He leans in conspiratorially. "The single most important thing to do is to gauge your audience. Everything else?" He waves his hand dismissively. "Small change."

And with that, Varric gets up from his chair and stretches. "But if you want some pointers, I happen to have a friend who might be able to help."

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About half an hour later, they are ensconced in the tavern with mugs of ale in front of them. The new addition to their duo — a tall, freckled woman with cheekbones you could cut yourself on and a very complex updo — straddles the bench next to Margo. The bard, who introduces herself as Maryden, thrusts an oversized string instrument that looks like a banjo on growth hormones into Margo's arms. It has four bass strings, spaced too wide for human fingers — let alone elven ones — and Margo just shrugs and hands it back with a sinking feeling. Fucking Maile. Fucking Torquemada. And fucking Ben-Hassrath with his fucking intercepted correspondence.



“I don’t believe I could play this.” This is completely and utterly out of her league. The last time Margo held a guitar, Jake had snatched it from her and asked her not to torture the poor thing. She might know her basic chords, and, back in the day, could sing at least a tiny part of Jake’s repertoire herself — but her brother was so above and beyond where she would ever be in terms of musical talent that it seemed like a pointless waste of time to get too much into it. In the universe’s allocation of predilections and skills, Jake had gotten all the musical genius in the family, and this had suited her just fine.

“If you prefer a simpler style, I have an old gittern I rarely use these days,” Maryden offers, with an expression so skeptical that it becomes abundantly clear to Margo that the only reason the minstrel is wasting her time at all is as a personal favor to Varric. Margo’s face must be sufficiently crestfallen that the bard takes pity on her. “Sometimes it matters little what you play, but that your music comes from a truthful place.” She gets up and walks away towards the tavern’s back room.

As if all of this weren’t mortifying enough, the front door opens, and Bull stomps in, Chargers in tow. He makes a beeline for their table. Krem and the other mercs settle at a different spot, which leads Margo to conclude that Bull is about to join Varric and her to talk shop, rather than simply socialize.

“Varric. Blondie. You’re already here.”

Varric cocks an eyebrow at the Qunari. “Really, Tiny? ‘Blondie?’ The point of a nickname is that it’s distinctive. Otherwise why bother? You’re just going to confuse yourself.”

Bull shrugs. “I keep them straight just fine. Anyway. We just need Dorian and Solas to show, and we can get to business.” He serves himself from their pitcher of ale, finishes half his pint in one draw, and burps dramatically. “Better. Varric, you comin’ too?”

Margo shoots a quick look at the dwarf. She would feel infinitely better if he did.

“Nah, Tiny. I’m sticking with the Herald on this one. Take Sera with you.”

Bull shakes his head. “Too many elves already. Besides, Sera’s great, but she’s got a mouth on her. We need to look innocuous. We can take her up to Redcliffe, but not inside.” He turns his attention to Margo. “All right, Blondie. Let’s clear the air, yeah? I wasn’t sure about you, but so far, you’ve come through. I’ve been sitting on that letter — my guys got it off the Vint mage you bedded on the Storm Coast. Took me a bit to put two and two together — you know, same Vint, same gal. I’m guessing he plucked it off you at some point.” He leans in, massive forearm muscles rippling under his grayish skin as he folds his hands over the table — a strangely scholarly pose for such a large figure. “You wanna know what happened to him?”

Margo meets the Qunari’s eye-patched gaze. “Honestly, Bull? I don’t really give a squat.” Well, she could be even more specific than that. It would benefit her immensely, as far as her cover is concerned, if the guy were dead. Sorry, Maile, but a witness is a witness. Margo winces internally. When did she get so ruthless?

Bull’s chest rumbles with a chuckle. “Loose ends, heh? He’s not gonna be your problem anymore. You’re welcome.”

Margo just nods. What else is there to say?

Maryden saunters back to them with a case in tow. Her eyes glide over Krem at the other table, and she adds a bit of sway to her hips as she makes her way towards them. Krem’s expression remains stoic, but the minstrel seems neither offended nor discouraged. She turns to Margo, opens the case,

and extracts the instrument that had been concealed inside. It is, by and large, a guitar. It's on the smaller side, with a shorter neck and a slightly different profile to the resonating chamber. The word that Margo's mind conjures from some dusty corner of her memory is "vihuela." Mercifully, it only has six strings. Of course, knowing the correct designation for the instrument isn't going to help her play it.

She takes the instrument awkwardly, and gives the strings a tentative pluck. It is tuned differently, but it's not that far off — she could conceivably re-tune it to a familiar pattern without snapping the catguts.

The next five minutes are utterly painful. Maryden's voice is all honey and perfect pitch, her fingers strumming at her supersized banjo with practiced ease. She tries to teach Margo a few popular songs — they start with something about Andraste's mabari — but it is utterly useless. Margo doesn't have the musical chops to pick up on the chords and transpose them to the vihuela without some kind of annotation — and even if she could, perhaps, reverse engineer it on her own time, she is too damn self-conscious, because at this point, their little group is starting to draw attention. To make matters worse yet, her voice is in a completely different range from what it used to be — it's pitched low, somewhere between an alto and a contralto, with a noticeable rasp that makes singing anything feminine an entirely absurd enterprise. She can carry a tune at least, but the upbeat, crowd-pleasing ballads Maryden suggests to her come out a bit demented.

"I am nowhere near drunk enough for this," Margo groans.

"Blondie, I know you're no bard, that much is clear. Fucking some high-up Orlesian doesn't mean you can sing in a tavern. Different skillsets. Look, don't overthink it. We just need to pass long enough to get into that mage shithole without getting caught and have a backup in case someone calls out the bluff."

Margo exhales, somewhere between relief and irritation. True. They just need to look the part.

She is about to set the guitar back into the case when the door opens to let in Dorian, with Blackwall and Sera closely on the mage's heels. The three seem to be in a heated and not altogether friendly debate over something. They all sport identical expressions of barely contained irritation. Dorian is the only one who seems vaguely amused. Bull gestures them over, and their table suddenly becomes crowded.

Blackwall plops himself down next to Margo, with the sound of creaking leather and clanking metal. The bench under them sags noticeably. "I didn't know you played," he says with a quick glance at the guitar, pale green eyes crinkling at the corners.

"I don't," Margo retorts dryly. "Not well, at least. But I suppose I better pick it up, and fast."

"Ugh. How hard can it be?" Sera goes through her pockets and extracts a handful of coppers. "You just need more booze. Whatcha having, Beardy?"

"Not the same piss you bought me last time. Pretty much anything but that." Blackwall places a few coins in Sera's outstretched palm. "On me."

Dorian hovers for a few seconds before taking a seat next to Bull. "Do make some room, Qunari. And move your legs. How you manage to take up half of this bench is entirely beyond me."

The Qunari smirks. "There's room in my lap if you're feeling crowded, Dorian."

"*Vishante kaffas*, half of Haven has been in your lap. It is the definition of crowded. I think I'll

pass.”

“Suit yourself.” Bull leans back, in a pose that signals he is the one presiding over the proceedings. “All right. Who are we missing? Solas?”

Sera, who is bustling back with a tray full of drinks, bread, and some grayish substance that might be cheese, although it could also be clay, makes a face. “Don’t hold your breath, big guy. That one’s too good to muck around with the rest of us little people. Like you’d see him in a tavern. Bleagh!”

Of course, this is the exact moment when the door opens, and in walks the aforementioned elf. In principle, and on a better day, Margo would be thoroughly amused by the impeccable comedic timing. As it stands, she is too busy trying to negotiate holding the accursed string instrument and receiving, from a very business-minded Blackwall, who has taken it upon himself to distribute the drinks Sera brought, a shot of something that looks like it should spontaneously combust upon contact with the air.

“Bottoms up,” Bull orders. And, of course, the entire gallery takes the shot. Margo’s eyes meet Dorian’s, who cocks an eyebrow and offers a half-shrug. “Savages,” he mouths at her. Margo grins, and knocks back the liquor. At this point, she is happy to reclassify the booze as a palliative.

She watches Solas glide over to their table. The elf hesitates for a few seconds, scanning the available seating. Maryden has left their company to speak with Krem, but the spot she vacated is quickly occupied by Sera, and Solas selects the opposite side, taking a seat next to Dorian at the very edge of the bench. Margo darts him a look, and is greeted by a small bow.

“Good evening,” he offers, to no one in particular. “Iron Bull, you asked us to see you.”

“Yeah.” The Qunari glances at the new addition to their group over Dorian’s head. “We’ll talk strategy in a minute. So long as I’m the one in charge of our side of the operation, I like to get to know the people I’m working with first.”

“You have fought alongside us for some time, Iron Bull,” Solas comments, his tone mild. “Is that insufficient?”

The Qunari’s good eye crinkles in amusement. “Have a drink, Solas. Unwind a bit.”

Margo exhales. This should all feel like relaxed, easy camaraderie, and yet, it doesn’t. There are the clear animosities — it doesn’t take any particular brilliance to realize Sera and Solas do not like each other, for example. But aside from the obvious, Margo cannot shake the feeling that half of the people assembled here are sizing each other up through careful, calculated moves and countermoves. And if that weren’t complicated enough, there are the emerging entanglements, emotional or otherwise. She watches across the table as Bull reaches for the flagon of beer, “accidentally” brushing his bare forearm against Dorian’s shoulder. Never mind that this took quite the gestural detour. Across from her, Varric’s head moves infinitesimally every time the tavern door opens, as if he is expecting someone. And Margo herself is carefully avoiding looking anywhere beyond Dorian’s left ear.

She is brought out of her uneasy reverie when Varric pushes another shot in her direction. Both Dorian and Solas have availed themselves of glasses of wine. Margo trades the shot for a mug of ale.

“So.” Blackwall turns to her, and taps the guitar with a callused finger. “One song.”

“Blackwall’s right, Blondie. Better be able to fake it.”

“I wanna hear a song, too,” Sera quips. “Just no elfy shite, yah?”

Screw it. The minstrel is out of earshot, clearly occupied with Krem. Margo takes a long swig of her ale and turns to the instrument. She adjusts the vihuela to a standard guitar tuning. What does she remember? More relevantly, what does she remember that doesn’t mention some inconvenient otherworldly things — and that she can actually sing.

“What sort of song are you in the mood for?” she asks the table, mostly to buy herself time. She strums an A7. It sounds like an A7, so there’s that, at least.

“Something with soul!” That, of course, is Bull, with a growl on the last word, as he knocks back another shot from a murky glass.

“How about *lurrrrvve* ? Maybe about certain pretty Antivan ambassadors and their clever tongues?” Sera leans forward and flicks her tongue suggestively at Blackwall. The poor man colors under his beard. “That’s not appropriate, Sera.” He throws a bread crust at the elven archer, which might have flown true if Sera hadn’t intercept it in mid-flight and stuffed it into her mouth. “Anyway. Lurv,” she says, chewing.

“Any other specifications?”

“Honestly, Prickly, I’d like something optimistic for once.”

She looks at Varric, and catches an infinitesimal nod towards the rest of the room. Right. Gauge your audience. Margo tries to think, despite the roaring performance anxiety. On the upside, at this point she is tipsy enough that if she doesn’t look at any of them, she can almost fashion the illusion of solitude. Something optimistic, but with soul. A love song would probably go over well, since those tend to be not particularly specific, but she is distinctly not feeling it. Nor do they tend to be optimistic.

She strums a G. Well, no time like the present.

*“Come gather ‘round people  
Wherever you roam... ”*

Her voice is more Cohen than Dylan, but she hits the right notes, at least, and after some fumbling, her fingers find the frets easily enough. She shuts everything out except for the memory of her brother singing on her couch, somewhere between one bad break up and the next.

*“... And don’t speak too soon.  
For the wheel’s still in spin.  
And there’s no tellin’ who that it’s namin’.  
For the loser now will be later to win...”*

And it might be the booze, but midway through the song, Margo decides that, while she’ll never sing opera, Maile’s voice is, in fact, passable in its own way. She can carry a tune. There’s a slightly wistful quality to the raspy contralto, without being full-on maudlin. With the right repertoire, this can be serviceable. And her fingers, while rusty and tentative at first, benefit from Maile’s sharper reflexes. But most importantly, she suddenly understands Varric’s comment about the importance of reading the audience. Because, in the end, it’s the song’s message that seems to hit a chord with the assembled company. She changes a couple of verses on the fly.

*“Come nobles and counselors, please heed the call...”*

*Don't stand in the doorway, don't block up the hall.  
For he that gets hurt will be he who has stalled.  
There's a battle outside and it's ragin'...* ”

By the end of the second verse, she gets a few approving cheers from not just the table, but the other patrons. And by the third, there are at least three voices that pick up the chorus. She recognizes Sera's: it's a tad off key, but what it lacks in tune it more than makes up in volume and enthusiasm. Blackwall's next to her is a deep bass. Varric's is more of a quiet hum.

*“For the times they are a-changin’.”*

Margo wishes Evie were around. In a sense, the song feels like it should be addressed to her. However tenuous their recent victories, they are something to celebrate.

She finishes abruptly, without any musical flourish to ease off, and looks up. Dorian grins, and starts clapping demonstratively, and then the rest of her table joins in. There are even a few approving whistles from the audience. Blackwall smiles from under his beard, puts his hand on her shoulder, and gives it a friendly squeeze.

Margo glances at Varric, and gives him a grateful nod. “Who's it by?” he asks, eyes glinting with keen interest. “Never heard that one before.”

“Who gives a shite, Varric? Proper *people* song, that.”

Margo busies herself with her ale to wash down the nervousness, and buy herself some time to respond. “My brother used to sing it,” she says finally, hoping the evasion will be enough. “That's how I learned it.” All other things being equal, always better to lie by saying the truth.

She looks up again, and notices Dorian's and Solas's gazes on her. Dorian's eyes twinkle with curiosity, and his Dali-esque mustache twitches in suppressed amusement. She casts a quick glance at Solas. His expression is harder to read — he keeps his face neutral but holds her gaze for a little too long, some kind of complicated question there that Margo isn't sure she can answer.

“You know what, Blondie?” Bull pours himself another ale. “We just might pass.”

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Bon Dylan's "The Times they Are A Changin'".  
Worth a listen!

Next up: Redcliffe arc.

Folks, fair warning: while I will still do some re-writing for the next part of the story, this part of the arc is not going to change dramatically, partly because I'm relatively happy with it already, and partly because it is fairly bleak and my instinct is to layer on the grimdark lol. In this next volley of chapters we're edging towards a combination of political thriller with elements of horror, just in time for October and Halloween, I suppose :) I will trigger warn for the chapters that need CWs. Things will get better (however temporarily), but not before they get a bit angsty.

Thank you, as ever, for following Margo and the rest of the crew on their

misadventures, and for leaving me your thoughts. <3

# Just Pretend

## Chapter Summary

In which the team discusses the concept of free will, and tries on their new masks.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Their departure gets pushed up by one day, and they leave at dusk the next evening. Their contingent, in addition to the ground team of four, includes a support group that will stay outside of Redcliffe to gather whatever mages they can round up, convey messages to headquarters, and act as backup if shit hits the fan. In addition to the Chargers and Sera, they have a new companion — an enchanter by the name of Ellandra, a somewhat austere woman Margo immediately takes a liking to, who volunteered “ethnographic details” — meaning intel — on Redcliffe. On the first march, Margo learns about phylacteries from her, and she spends the rest of the day feeling vaguely nauseated and not a little furious on the mages’ behalf. The Chantry certainly likes its leashes, chemical or otherwise.

The journey, however, is harrowing, and it leaves little time to socialize. Whatever political choreography is happening around the Templars — something about an Orlesian noble throwing in his support with the Inquisition — Evie and her team had to leave in a hurry, and in secret. Bull, apparently under Leliana’s orders, pushes his team to cover the distance in three days to beat the news of Evie’s decision. They walk for fourteen, fifteen hours straight, with only a brief stop for lunch and the occasional skirmish, and Margo simply collapses on her bedroll, with barely enough energy to skim a chapter from the *Genitivi* — an instructive read, but she’s barely managing to keep focus — and pop a small lichen strip into her mouth before closing her eyes. She is too exhausted to dream.

The plan is relatively simple, and by the time they reach the outskirts of Redcliffe, Margo’s heard it so many times that if someone were to wake her up in the middle of the night she could recite it verbatim. Get past the guards at the northern entrance to the village — the one with the new ferry over the lake, apparently added because the south gate is blocked by a particularly unpleasant Fade rift — without drawing attention to Dorian. The minstrel disguise, carefully distributed among them, is as equally designed to grant them access as it is to deflect attention from the Tevinter mage. Bull speculates that if Alexius gets wind of his former mentee’s return, Dorian will be summoned into his presence, and there will be little chance for them to reconnoiter without scrutiny. The advantage of the minstrel disguise, in addition to appearing innocuous, is that it is so damn absurd. No one will suspect a self-respecting Tevinter altus — apparently the correct title for Dorian — to pretend to be an itinerant entertainer. Or so the theory goes. After they’re in, the goal is to set up in the tavern, identify the dissidents, and smuggle them out.

“You know Alexius will eventually discover that I have wandered back,” Dorian cautions, as they share their dinner of dried meat and bread. “We will need a plausible story once we are inside.”

Bull nods. “Yeah. I’ve thought of it. We’re gonna bring the costuming down a notch once we’re in place. When your Vint magister shows up, you’re gonna say we’re with you and that you’ve returned to the fold. As far as he’s concerned, I’m your Tal-Vashoth bodyguard.” He gestures at

Solas. "He's your manservant, or whatever. And she's your entertainer."

Margo glances at Solas. His expression seems placid enough, but his eyes are thunderous in a suddenly ashen face. "I believe 'slave' would be more accurate, would it not?"

"Easy there, Solas." Bull's voice is deceptively light. "It's just pretend. You think it doesn't chafe to introduce myself as a Tal-Va-fucking-shoth?"

"I gather you prefer the status of a mindless thrall, subservient to an ideology that suppresses any expression of autonomy?"

Margo blinks. There is almost something a little feral under Solas's civil tone.

Bull's response is deceptively nonchalant. "Do you really think you're free, Solas? What about that guy we passed in the Crossroads, the one who's barely able to scrape by and feed his kids. Think he's free? What about the cute redhead who offered to take you out back for a couple of coppers when we were getting the waterskins filled? She free, too?"

"I do believe that one was exercising a great deal of free will," Dorian interjects with truly spectacular poise. Not even a twitch of a smile. Margo focuses on nibbling on her bread crust and pretends that the pebbles stuck in the sole of her boot are truly fascinating geological finds. She had missed that particular episode.

"They still are capable of choice within the range of possibilities afforded to them. Your religion would deny them that."

Margo's eyes drift to the elf. To say that he looks peeved would be like saying that strychnine causes breathing difficulties. Also, his ears have gone pink.

"Watch out, Bull." Sera stretches out next to Margo by the campfire and takes a huge bite from a strip of jerky. She speaks around the food, so the words come out a little muffled. "You're about to be told how the elfy elves are the most 'auto-mo-nous' elves that have ever elved in Thedas. Because, elven glory, yah?" She accompanies this by a rather lewd gesture miming a giant phallus.

"Sera, I said nothing about elves. Although, why do you hold our people in such low regard?"

"Just cuz I don't whinge and moan about how we were so grand once? Egh. You do that well enough for the both of us, yah? Got better things."

Margo sighs. Oy. This is going to go splendidly.

"What about you, Blondie? You think you're free?"

Margo starts. Considering Maile's cumulative clusterfuck of bad decisions, made in spectacularly shitty circumstances, she isn't sure whose position she finds more compelling. But this isn't just idle philosophical conversation. This feels like staking political claims over bloody conflicts that are neither abstract nor ancient history. She considers how to navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of the two irreconcilable frameworks.

"Depends. Are we talking about freedom to , or freedom from ?" She gets two very speculative sets of eyes trained on her for her trouble. Though, one and a half set of eyes would be more accurate. Right. It is unlikely that the members of her new social circle are interested in hearing about Immanuel Kant, or the long history of her own world's debates on the hoary topic of individual liberty and free will. She hugs her knees to her chest, suddenly heartsick with her hopeless dislocation. Dorian and Sera are waiting expectantly. All they're missing is a bowl of popcorn



between them. But the other two sport remarkably similar expressions that suggest that her answer might matter for their further classificatory filing of her. Not to mention that anything she says is just going to get weaponized in their irresolvable debate.

Margo doesn't like it, but there's nothing to be done about it. Better suck it up.

"You're both assuming that there is a particular kind of 'self' making a choice," she finally says, because extricating herself from this discussion entirely seems like the best possible approach, and the only strategy that comes to mind is to throw the "no-self" kitchen sink at them... and then run. "Whether it's autonomous or predetermined, you're assuming a willful person at the center." She stifles a yawn, and turns to Bull. "Can spirits be part of the Qun?"

That seems to throw the Qunari for a loop. He frowns. "They're spirits, Blondie. What are you sayin'?"

"Exactly. They are their respective natures, no more, no less. They cannot be other than what they are. Doesn't the Qun argue the same thing about everyone else? So isn't excluding them illogical?"

He looks uneasy. Ha. Got one. Margo catches Solas's eyes on her, and the look he is giving her is... She's not sure what it is, but cats and canaries come to mind. She turns to face him. Not so fast, buddy. "Solas, from what I understand, the Tranquil are completely rational." She wants to say something to the effect that they are perfect embodiments of the idea of "rational choice," but decides the elf probably doesn't want a rant on Adam Smith. "They are capable of making clear-headed, logical decisions. They are not influenced by social mores or by their own passions. In this, they are perfect examples of autonomous individuality. Yet, you consider them damaged beyond repair."

"They are severed from the Fade, lethallan... They desire nothing, and hence their full ability to choose is taken from them by definition." The elf is frowning. Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't that.

"Are you suggesting that it is our desires that constitute our freedom to choose?"

"Of course. One may choose, or choose not to choose. One can go with or against one's desires. That, in itself, is a form of freedom."

This amuses Bull to no end. "What was that, Solas? 'Cause you just sounded like a Qunari for a second there."

"But desires are neither autonomous nor permanent." Margo can't help herself. She smiles, probably a bit slyly. "Let's take an example. You might want... a frilly cake." Solas's eyes widen at this suggestion. "The only reason you would want it is that you have a preexisting idea of it. Maybe you've tried one before and remember enjoying it. Or maybe you want it because someone reminded you of it just now. But by tomorrow, something might change, and you will no longer want any frilly cakes. Or you will realize that your memory of them was faulty, and that frilly cakes are, in fact, not to your liking at all. Or that they tend to be accompanied by tea, and it's not worth the trouble. And if the one doing the wanting — and hence the choosing — is unreliable over time, then how is desire a good indicator for any kind of individuality or autonomy?"

"I assure you that my desires are not so inconsistent or variable as that. Lethallan."

Margo narrows her eyes at the strange way in which he tacked on the endearment — somewhere between an emphasis and an afterthought.

“And I do believe my memory remains adequate. For instance, I still recall our discussion of ‘sophistry.’ Though I do enjoy the reminder.” He delivers all that in a mellow tone, but with a rather pointed look.

“To be clear, we’re still talking about frilly cakes, yeah?” Bull interjects.

“S’over, you two. She owned both of ya.” Sera grins. “There’s another one with a clever tongue! Right, elfy?” Sera turns to Solas with a sarcastic smirk. It’s met with profound peevishness. “Pffft, don’t pout — clever tongue’s a good thing.”

Solas colors slightly.

Margo feels the heat in her own cheeks, and decides that the safest place to look is the campfire. Right. Oxidation — fascinating process, that.

“Sera, you are, as usual, taking the conversation in a distinctly questionable direction...”

“How would ya know where I’m takin’ it? Maybe cuz you went there first! Ha!” Sera bursts out laughing.

Margo decides that this is her cue to fade out. She bids them goodnight, climbs into her bedroll, and drifts off to the sounds of another debate: this one between Bull and Dorian, about the relative merits of different Tevinter adult entertainment establishments.

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“Minstrels, heh? Where d’ye say ye come from?”

The Redcliffe guard eyes them with unconcealed skepticism. Margo gives her a friendly grin, but it doesn’t seem to assuage the woman’s doubts one bit.

They do make quite the quartet. Margo readjusts the marigold behind her ear, which she added to her disguise at Sera’s insistence. “Makes you look less... sharp and pointy.” The poor flower is probably wilting from all the standing around in the heat. Next to her, Bull, in something that can only be described as sirwal pants so red and so wide you could use them for dead reckoning, and tucked into a pair of fussy leather boots with turquoise beading and upturned toes, crosses his arms over his massive chest. It is strange to see him without a sword, and he is clearly unsure of what to do with his hands. Sera’s network is meant to smuggle their armor and weaponry under the cover of night, but until then, the task is to look like they’re there to entertain.

They certainly look entertaining. Every time Bull turns his head, there is a melodic tinkle from the two silver bells hanging from the tips of his horns.

Solas is not faring much better. He looks like he escaped from a period piece on Robin Hood — the kind that’s so low budget that the costumes were donated by the local charitable organization from whatever remained of last year’s Halloween discards. The lime green hat with the long bird feather is an especially inspired touch — though the color does nothing for his complexion. Margo tries her damn best not to look at him, because every time she does, she is overwhelmed by the desire to sing “We’re men, we’re men in tights!” “I think this is actually an improvement from the usual, Solas,” Dorian commented on seeing him. “It has the merit of having identifiable colors.” To be fair to Solas, the elf has taken it all in stride with remarkable self-confidence. Also, it turns out that he can juggle surprisingly well — although Margo is fairly certain that he cheats.

Of the four of them, Dorian is by far the most at ease with the charade. His outfit is not a particularly radical departure from his usual clothes — although he added a cape — but what

makes the costume is the large lute strapped to his back instead of his usual staff. A tad more kohl, a dab more hair pomade, and he looks like the type of 18th century hooligan who performs scathing political songs to rouse the peasantry and terrorizes the burghers with his indiscriminate seduction of their significant others.

Margo's outfit would make any Renaissance fair enthusiast proud. At least it's not a dress. The bodice and the loose linen shirt beneath leave rather little to the imagination. They're over leather leggings — thank you Unspecified Deity and Josephine's more merciful streak — even if they are, in Margo's humble opinion, of the overly form-fitting persuasion. What saves her from looking indecent — and parachutes her closer to the romanticism of the starving artist — is the fact that she does seem somewhat undernourished. "You have lovely collarbones, if you do not mind me saying. We should show them off!" Josephine had entirely too much fun outfitting them all, fussing over their costumes like they were getting ready for a masquerade ball and not sneaking into a potentially hostile fortified townlet. What Margo hadn't bargained for is the rather liberal neckline.

"Chin up, Blondie," Bull had rumbled, with an appreciative chuckle. "If they're staring at your tits, they're not paying attention to your singing." Timeless wisdom, right there.

Margo readjusts the vihuela on her back.

"Most recently, from Val Chevin, my dear lady," Dorian's voice takes on the sing-song quality of a born bullshitter, "but before that, from all four corners of Thedas, and dare I say, beyond."

The guard blinks. "What'ye sayin', boy? There ain't nothin' beyond Thedas, there ain't."

"Hey," Bull's voice is deep and a little velvety. "How's the atmosphere in the village? People gettin' bored yet?"

The woman shrugs. "Bored? There's no time to get bored." She sighs. "Bored's all well and good when ye don't have half of feckin' Tevinter strollin' around like they own the place."

"Yeah, that's what I'm sayin'. Tensions high? People need to let off some steam? I'm telling you, what you need is some good quality entertainment. And we are... Good. Quality. Entertainment."

They go around like that for a couple more times, but what seals the deal in the end is Margo noticing a heat rash along the guardswoman's neck, where the skin chafes from the perspiration and the friction from her armor's collar. Margo fishes out a salve from her pack — the same diaper cream formula she used to make Bull's eye-patch poultice — and presses it into the woman's hand.

"For your neck," she says. "Works like a charm."

"Ye tryin' to bribe me, lass?"

"Bribe you?" Margo tries to adopt a look of wide-eyed innocence. "I'd never try that. Oh, and don't put the potato starch on it. It makes it worse in the long run."

The guardswoman shrugs, opens the jar, sniffs it, and slathers the poultice on her skin. The relief on her face tells Margo that they're in. "Don't ye go tellin' anyone it was me who let ye through, ye hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Bull confirms. And then, they're on the ferry, which is really a glorified raft made of mismatched logs tied together with some alarmingly fraying rope. A fisherman type, who is missing a few teeth, but makes up for it with the most impressive pair of whiskers Margo has seen

on someone who isn't a lynx, pushes them towards the Redcliffe docks with an expression of cosmic ennui. He barely even glances at them — never mind their ridiculous outfits. Another day, another copper.

Margo, who is wedged between Solas and Dorian on one side of the raft, to counterbalance the Qunari on the other, tilts her chin in the direction of their self-appointed Charon, and mumbles “tough crowd” under her breath. Dorian’s jaw twitches, and Margo decides he is probably biting the inside of his cheek, trying not to laugh.

Bull keeps peering into the water with a look of intense — if alarmed — concentration. “I could swear I saw another one...” he mumbles.

“Fish?” Dorrian ventures.

“Nah, not fish. Fish wouldn’t be a problem... Too many legs...”

A movement on her other side catches her attention. Solas, who has tipped the absurd green hat forward at a rakish angle, flutters his fingers in the direction of her ear.

“If I may...?”

Before Margo can figure out what he wants, he reaches and plucks the long-suffering flower from her hair — somehow managing to brush the back of his hand against her bare shoulder and to sweep his fingers over the curve of her ear in one fell swoop. Her skin tingles in the wake of his touch. Margo has the ungenerous suspicion that he added some magical special effect — probably in retaliation for the previous night’s “sophistry.” Bastard. She narrows her eyes at the elf and is met with an innocent look. And then he passes his hand over the flower, and it revives a bit, looking mildly less worn out by its new decorative status. He tucks it back behind her ear.

“There. Much improved.”

Margo cocks an eyebrow. “Did you somehow stabilize it? Or will it still keep wilting?”

He almost doesn’t smile. “I do not perform miracles, lethallan. It will certainly keep wilting.”

Dorian, on the other side of her, is overcome by a coughing fit that sounds as fake as his lute. “You could freeze it solid, and dampen the chill effect with a ward, Solas...”

“I could,” the elf agrees easily.

The undercurrent of flirtation is fairly obvious, but something about it makes Margo cross. Perhaps it’s the fact that he seems more comfortable with the underdeterminacy of it all: as long as nothing is acknowledged, it’s all fair game, apparently. Or perhaps it is the fact that they are wearing masks — or, to be more precise, disguises. Everything becomes a little bit more facile once spared the burden of being oneself — whatever that might mean in all of their cases. She turns to face the elf. His eyes fix on hers, and he holds her gaze.

“Nothing is real, everything is permitted, hmm?” Margo’s tone is light, but she stares back, fed up with being furtive about the whole thing.

A trace of a flinch. But then Solas regroups, and there is a wry cheekiness to his expression. And perhaps the edge of a challenge.

Bull gives Margo a brief glance before returning to scrutinizing the waters. “Nice one, Blondie. Now you sound like a proper bard.”

“We’re here,” their taciturn Charon announces suddenly, and a few seconds later, the raft rams into a fishing dock.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, and the wonders of diaper rash cream.

Next up: A town under occupation

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Folks, I promised myself that I would finish this re-write during Wiptober and finally earn myself that green checkmark for at least one project I've started (ha!). So, going forward, here is what to expect:

- \* Chapter 37 to Chapter 45 are very very minimal rewrites of the Redcliffe arc, mostly fixing punctuation and typos I missed in the original version. I will be posting them in one big batch.

- \* Chapters 46 to Chapter 50 (let's call it the Goran arc) will get some cosmetic changes, mostly expanding some details and characterization.

- \* Chapters 51 and 52 will get more significant changes, and some added scenes I wanted to include, but didn't manage the first time around.

Most of this last part of the story was already beta-ed, therefore my additions are less about fixing the mess, and more about tying in some dangling threads and minor inconsistencies. Thank you for reading!

# Spot the Spook

## Chapter Summary

In which the team enters Redcliffe, and Margo meets a knight, a tranquil, and a stool pigeon.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Their light-hearted mood does not last. Redcliffe feels wrong. Margo has never been in a place under military occupation, but this is the first association that comes to her mind as they slowly make their way up the steep incline towards the local tavern.

“Was it like this the last time you were here?” Bull asks quietly. He and Dorian walk side by side, with Margo and Solas bringing up the back.

“No.” Dorian’s tone is dry. “It was distinctly less...” He seems to search for the adequate word. “Dour,” he finally offers. Margo would have gone with “terrifying.”

The local inhabitants give them furtive if cautiously curious glances and scurry on. The conversations are hushed. Military types with piercing, suspicious eyes walk in small groups of three or four, slowing down to eavesdrop on the locals’ mutterings — although Margo isn’t sure that blatantly standing there and staring at people as they talk counts as “eavesdropping,” exactly.

There is an incredible amount of mages — judging by their dress, at least. But all of them seem nervous and ragged, eye sockets bruised with lack of sleep — and sometimes just bruised. And none of them carry staves.

But the social situation isn’t the only thing that’s cause for concern. The first time Margo notices the strange effect is when she passes through what she originally thought was a swarm of fruit flies — except the hypothetical *drosophila* turn out, upon closer inspection, to be tiny, immaterial yellow particles of... something. It’s not a something that Margo has ever encountered before, but as she walks through it — a stupid decision, in retrospect — she is suddenly struck by the incredible slowness of her movements. An uncanny feeling of unreality settles over her — as if she were walking through a dream. But not a dream of the Fade variety — something more out of control than that. Her eyes drift out of focus, and she blinks several times, trying to get her vision to cooperate.

Cool fingers wrap around her wrist, and she is yanked out of the uncanny reality warp, only to stumble into Solas — who, apparently, was the one doing the yanking.

“Oof,” Margo mutters, righting herself. “What was that?” She tries to turn around to take a closer look at the pocket of misbehaving fairy dust but is apprehended by the elf once again. Solas puts his hand on her lower back and pushes just enough to keep her from slowing down.

He turns to her with a smile that Margo suspects is not for her benefit. “Keep walking, lethallan. We do not wish to attract more attention than we already have.” His voice is barely above a whisper.

Indeed, they do not. Two soldiers in unfamiliar but expensive armor, their stares heavy with distrust, follow their progress from the shade of a nearby awning. Margo drapes her arm over Solas's shoulder, leans in, and puts her lips against his ear. Right. Might as well play the part of the carefree, flirtatious doxy of the singing persuasion.

"Fade pocket?" she whispers.

If Solas is surprised by any part of this maneuvering, he doesn't let on — his hand moves over to her hip, and he pulls her closer. He mirrors her strategy. While the feel of his lips against her ear sends a shiver down her spine, the words themselves are more than sobering.

"Unfamiliar magic. Damaged Veil."

The local watering hole, called the Gull and Lantern, contains an assortment of more of the same contingent — mostly mages, in various stages of sober terror and drunken despondency, and a small but colorful collection of watchful, quiet characters who sit in corners and appear to be doing some very active listening. Their merry band of four settles at a table within earshot of an angry-looking mage who is spewing a clearly unsolicited diatribe about the Chantry, the Templars, and the Inquisition to her silent companion. The man nods and grunts at the appropriate times but doesn't seem to be paying much attention — he is too busy watching the room in general and the newcomers in particular.

Bull selects a seat with his back against the far wall — or, to be more precise, against a gigantic bear pelt — and a good view of the common room. Solas and Dorian take the chairs kitty-corner to his, and Margo is left sitting with her back to the rest of the tavern, which is not a comfortable proposition by any stretch of the imagination. The hairs on her nape feel like they're considering evolving into prehensile extensions just to compensate for all the hostile staring.

Bull leans forward, pitching his voice such that it carries to their small circle, but not beyond. "All right, here's the strategy. We're gonna divide the tasks. Dorian, take a look at the patrons, see if anyone seems familiar. Even if it's just vaguely familiar — say, you saw them last time you were passin' through — still counts. Solas, can you get a read on the mages? And the others? Give me a sense of how skilled they are, that sort of thing?"

Solas inclines his head slightly. "It would be imprecise at best, but I should manage to assess the strength of their connection to the Fade."

Bull nods, satisfied. "Works for me. Blondie, you're on logistics. Go chat up the barkeep, see if there's a room available — nothing fancy, but don't let them give you one with only blind walls. We'll need at least two exits. Find out whatever the barkeep's willing to share, but don't overpush. And see if they got a minstrel working the place already."

Margo stands up from her chair with a distinct feeling of relief. At least if she's mobile, maybe the sensation that multiple someones are trying to drill a hole in her back by staring at it intently will dissipate. On her way down from the platform, she passes a barmaid, who gives her a strange look but proceeds to sashay her way to the table of "minstrels" with a fairly convincing rendition of a Mona Lisa smile.

The tavern looks like something born of the utopian pipe dream of an optimistic but mathematically challenged local merchant whose finances had stretched thin by the time the enormous building had been erected, and who had said "screw it" and IKEA'd the furniture. The bar is a set of trestles covered with rough planks in lieu of a proper counter.

Margo makes her way between the patrons, noticing that conversations hush as she passes. The

looks she gets are a strange mix of curiosity, surprise, and nervousness — which either means that her disguise is not quite having the desired effect, or that there is something about her presumed social role that makes the locals fidgety. She finds neither eventuality particularly comforting.

The bartender is a short, corpulent, bald fellow of indeterminate age, with light, expressionless eyes. When he glances at Margo, his attention first settles on her ears, then on the neck of the vihuela poking out from behind her shoulder. And then on the expanse of exposed skin. Overview completed, he returns to wiping a perfectly dry glass.

“Good evening,” Margo tries. She’s not sure how she’s supposed to address him. Ser? Serah? Messere? She’s heard variations of all of these, but their corresponding social maps are murky at best. Maybe just “barkeep” would do?

“And what are you supposed to be? Some kind of minstrel?”

Margo nods. “That’s right! My companions and I just arrived. Do you have a room available?”

He squints, clearly deciding where to locate her on the sliding scale of possible extortion. “I might. Whose are you, anyway?”

Margo blinks. “I beg your pardon?”

“I said,” the bartender repeats with infinite patience, “whose are you?”

What the hell is this? Is he assuming that she is a servant? Or a slave, perhaps? Or is it that bards are assigned to a particular noble that hires them? Unless the man is asking about her qualifications — whom she studied under. “I’m not sure I understand your question, good sir.” She tries for a winsome smile.

The bartender sets down the long-suffering glass and fixes Margo with a very unpleasantly speculative gaze. “Just arrived, did you? Redcliffe’s closed for visitors. Got the writ of authorization, then?”

Margo swallows. If there ever were a textbook example of a collaborator, this guy is it. But that particular insight doesn’t solve the immediate problem. Margo briefly considers whether Alexius has instituted a visa system. She dismisses the possibility. If such a thing were in place, it is unlikely that the guard would have let them in quite so easily. What, then...?

The bartender looks at her with impatient irritation. “You daft, lass? If you want to play the Gull and Lantern, you’ll need to show me your writ of authorization. Magister’s orders. You got in this far, so whose are you? Who issued your writ?”

Aha. Margo files this information for later discussion with the others. So, some kind of licensing system for musicians: either to suppress unwanted political commentary or to make the general atmosphere in the town even more oppressive than it already is.

Margo considers her options. She could try for dumb blonde to weedle more information out of the fellow, but her blasted voice — not to mention current outfit — is too far on the femme fatale side of the spectrum to pull it off. After a brief moment of hesitation, she props her elbows on the counter, and leans in. Her antics get the desired result, at least, and Margo feels a grim kind of satisfaction from the fact that the barkeep’s eyes travel in the designated direction before he looks back up. His expression, however, is one of undiluted suspicion. As in, nice view, now where’s the other shoe?

“Look.” Margo lowers her voice to an insinuating murmur, implying that she is about to share a



big, and potentially embarrassing secret. If she is right in gauging this particular audience, Stool Pigeon here shouldn't be able to resist the prospect of reportable gossip. "The boss got a summons. And he's not exactly forthcoming about where his contracts come from. You know, in case the rest of us poach it from under him and dump his overbearing ass."

Whatever else might be going on with the local drink-serving snitch, crude class antagonism is something he can get behind. "Yeah. Reason I work for myself now."

Oh, sure. Just with a little extra moonlighting for the local Gestapo, but details, right? Margo keeps her expression firmly within the spectrum of class solidarity.

"Who's your boss, anyway?"

She tilts her head towards where the rest of the team is sitting. "See that unaccommodating-looking horned fellow right over there?" It is fortunate that Bull has removed the little bells from his horns — hard to be intimidated by someone who tinkles at every movement, even if that someone is seven feet tall and might give an assault tank a run for its money.

The barkeep chokes out an impressed sort of noise and glances back at her, with another not particularly discreet look at her cleavage. Well, whatever distracts him from her bluffing. "Yeesh, lass. Wouldn't wanna cross that. How'd you end up with one of 'em ox-men, anyway?"

Margo shrugs. "Bad luck, I guess. What's your name?"

"Lloyde. With an 'e.'"

Margo has no idea why it seems to matter to Stool Pigeon how his name gets spelled, but she lets it be. "He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" and all that. "Lloyde, then. Do you think you can put us up? I hate going back to the boss with bad news. That won't go well for me."

He clucks somewhat sympathetically. "Beats you, don't he? You know, fine lass like yourself, I could find you something to do around here."

Margo summarily ignores the leery come-on qua job offer and shrugs. "Wish that I could, but you know how these things go. Can't stand the idea of staying in one place."

"Suit yourself, then. A room you say? How many, four? All I got is something on the top floor — not much to look at, and it's got mice in the walls."

Margo nods. "Does it have a window, at least?"

"No windows, unless you count the roof hatch."

"Does it open?" She leans forward and waves her hand at her companions. "They don't exactly bathe, you know."

That garners her no sympathy, but the barkeep nods.

She smiles at him. "Guess that'll do. But we aren't wealthy."

The Stool Pigeon makes a face. "Figures. Well, you tell your boss that if he wants it, it's three silvers a night, all paid up front."

Margo narrows her eyes. Not bargaining with this guy would be criminal. "You know that's steep, right? For an attic room with no windows?"

He crosses his pudgy arms over his chest. “Roof access.”

“Mice in the walls.”

“It’s ‘cause it’s warm. Heat travels up.”

“So it’s sweltering hot to boot? One and a half.”

Lloyde-with-an-e — chuckles, gives Margo’s shoulders and décolleté a good, long ogle, and says, “Fine. For you, two silvers.”

Margo nods and asks about the competition. Lloyde the Leering Stool Pigeon shakes his head. “No one’s been playing since the other gal that worked here got kicked out for ‘agitating.’ That’s when the magister decided you lot needed an authorization.”

Margo tries to determine how the official restrictions might be finagled. “So, what are the rules, then?”

Lloyde proceeds to check off items on his fingers. His voice suggests that he might be quoting from memory. “‘No singing. No playing instruments, recitin’ poetry, or talking demonstratively in an inflammatory manner.’”

“‘Inflammatory?’” Margo asks. She is fairly certain that the irascible mage’s diatribes against the Chantry and associated organizations might count as “inflammatory” in certain circles.

“‘Inciting national strife,’” Lloyde recites by rote.

Aha. So, essentially, critiquing Tevinter. “Is that it?”

Lloyde gives her a suspicious little look. “No whistling.”

Margo promises to return with the money and makes her way towards the rest of her team. In many ways, this is working out in their favor. Since they do not have a writ, they cannot perform, and if they cannot perform, they cannot be called out as fakes.

In the time that it takes her to negotiate with Lloyde, the tavern fills up. She jostles between small knots of people — most of them mages, but there are other, seemingly magically neutral civilians. A few new additions draw her attention. One is a dark-haired man standing somewhat awkwardly between the foyer and the main room. He wears the robes of a mage but holds himself differently from the others. In fact, he is the only person that she has seen so far who isn’t telegraphing terrified despair, hostile suspicion, or drunken belligerence. He seems... remarkably content.

And then, of course, Margo notes the scar on his forehead and freezes in place. Someone bumps into her, and she apologizes distractedly before forcing herself to stop staring and start moving. So that’s what a regular Tranquil brand looks like. It’s the same pattern as Evie’s — though the Herald’s is smaller, not to mention fainter. This, whatever it is, is a bona fide cattle brand.

The other newcomer to draw Margo’s attention is so profoundly out of place that she has to blink twice before she decides that she isn’t hallucinating him. The man puts her in mind of one of those children’s visual games: “spot the thing that doesn’t belong.” Well, spotted. It’s not just the knight regalia, complete with a worn breastplate embossed with the head of something that could, if she were to squint, be interpreted as a lion — though could as easily be a very unkempt scientist on the verge of a ground-breaking discovery. It’s that the owner of said breastplate is absurdly, almost obnoxiously handsome. The sort of blonde, square-jawed, even-featured handsome that might have your Baba say, “Ay, ay, ay, little thistle, not all is gold that glitters. A girl’s not a magpie, hmm?”

And then cluck with barely concealed amusement. The fellow's good looks are somewhat tarnished by a layer of road grime.

Margo frowns. Whatever Ser Knight is doing in Redcliffe, he doesn't seem to be particularly cognizant of or intrigued by the current political climate. He looks around with an air of barely contained impatience and just strolls over to the bar with a grim set to his jaw — like someone on a Serious Quest. Margo watches him engage Lloyd the Leery Stool Pigeon in conversation. She turns away and rejoins the others.

She arrives in the middle of a quiet debate.

“Hmm. What about the redhead over there — third table from the door?” Bull is sitting in a relaxed pose, ankle over knee, a mug of ale held in a loose grip over his thigh.

“Doubtful,” Solas volunteers, with a quick glance at Margo. There is something a little mischievous in his eyes, and his gaze lingers a tad beyond merely polite.

“All right. Dorian, your turn.”

Margo sends a mental prayer to whomever might be listening that the game they're playing is closer to “Spot the Spook” than to “Who Would You Rather.”

“The knight who just came in,” Dorian says without hesitation.

Bull narrows his eye at the mage. “Really, Vint? The blond? C'mon, you can do better than that.”

Dorian shrugs noncommittally. Margo looks between the three specimens and decides two things. First, that she misses Sera. And second, that they are not paying her enough for this shit.

“Bull?” To be fair to the Qunari, his attention switches swiftly, and there is nothing lazy or distracted about his gaze. He is all there. Mildly reassured by this, Margo quickly relates her new intel, and requests additional funds to pay for the room. Bull counts out the silvers and hands her a small purse.

“All right, Blondie. There's enough here for three days. Better get settled.”

When Margo stands up from her chair, she freezes. Her alchemy satchel is missing. She almost swears out loud, but catches herself at the very last moment. Instead, she grips the coin purse tightly and makes it back to Lloyd, panic pulsing in her temples as she walks.

It's not that the satchel had anything valuable to anyone but herself. It did, however, contain all of her lichen.

She pays for their room in a state of numb, unfocused anxiety, then takes a look around, trying to spot the cutpurse — futile as the exercise might be. The only obviously shady characters are the unconvincingly disguised secret police — and her own team.

As she scans the crowd, Margo notices that the blond knight from earlier, who has occupied a small table in the corner of the room, is gawking at her like she is the second coming of Andraste. She frowns, trying to parse the meaning of this bizarre behavior. He stares. Passes his hand over his face. Blinks vigorously. Rubs his eyes again, and then stares some more with an expression of such profound awe that Margo takes a look behind her in case Andraste is standing right there, ordering a drink. The knight, in the meantime, makes to stand up, then plops back down and returns to his utterly incomprehensible gawking.

Margo decides to leave Lancelot to his insanity and walks back to the others to get a sense of what their strategy might be now that the singing is firmly — and mercifully — off the table.

“Excuse me?” Someone brushes her arm. She turns, half-expecting the demented knight, but instead comes face to face with the Tranquil. “I am sorry to bother you,” the man states, in a tone that suggests no such sentiment. And, in fact, suggests no sentiment at all.

“Hello,” Margo tries. The Tranquil’s lack of affect is disconcerting, but she forces her face into a friendly smile.

“Thank you for speaking with me. I know that my tone sometimes produces negative responses. Based on your paleness and dilated pupils I inferred that you are in distress.” He extends his hand. Margo looks down. Her heart skips at the sight of her lost satchel. “I saw a man take this from you. He dropped it by the door. I therefore concluded that perhaps your emotional state was produced by the loss of your purse. Was I correct?”

Margo nods vigorously. “Yes! Yes, thank you so much!” She grabs the satchel, but even before she has the chance to look inside, the tentative hopefulness dissipates. It is way too light. She checks anyway. There is nothing left except for some botanical dust.

The tranquil tilts his head in a curiously avian gesture, and peers into her face. “Your emotional predicament has not been solved. It was the contents you cared about, not the purse itself?”

Margo sighs. “Yes. But... thank you anyway. I’m still glad to have it returned. Did you happen to see who took it off me?”

The tranquil nods. “I did. You were staring at me when one of the Tevinter men collided with you. He has left since.”

Margo flushes, but forces the embarrassment down. There is no trace of judgement in the Tranquil’s voice — just neutral observation. “I guess it serves me right for staring, huh?”

The Tranquil’s gaze is placid. “There is no reason to connect the two events beyond simple opportunity. The theft is not a retribution for your curiosity. I am Clemence.”

“Margo,” she says. “What are you doing here?”

“Magister Alexius does not approve of those without magic, like you and me. He says all Tranquil must leave Redcliffe, but who would take us in?”

Margo frowns. “So where do the Tranquil go, then?”

Clemence clasps his hands in front of him, but not, seemingly, in a gesture of nervousness. His bodily movements appear deliberately choreographed — as if he knows that standing too still will produce more discomfort for his interlocutors and introduces artificial fidgeting. Because it carries no emotional reference, the effect is only more unsettling.

“I am unsure. Without an obvious destination, I have chosen to remain. There are few of us still here.”

Margo forces herself not to get distracted by Clemence’s scripted movements and flat tone and focuses on his words. “How many of you were here originally? And how long ago did Alexius start driving your people out?”

Clemence pauses, his face going completely still. “Fifty-four in total. Tranquil from several Circles

congregated in Redcliffe. Magister Alexius arrived at nightfall two days after we retreated from the Temple of Sacred Ashes. It has been one month and ten days.”

“And how many remain?”

Another short pause. “As of last week, aside from me, there were three others. I have not observed Lydia in two days and therefore suspect that she may be gone as well.”

Margo frowns. Something doesn’t quite add up. She has heard nothing about fifty-four Tranquil wandering around the Hinterlands. None have come to Haven. Cassandra or Varric have not mentioned any actually existing Tranquil — even in light of their discovery of Evie’s past. Are the Tranquil truly so invisible? Surely, someone would have taken note of a drove of strange, affectless Redcliffe refugees — at least as a creepy curio.

“Are you sure they are leaving?” she asks.

Clemence balances from one foot to the other. “No. In fact, it has occurred to me that I have not noticed Tranquil walk through the gates. One entrance has been blocked by a difficult rift. The other one requires passage on a ferry. I have not become aware of other Tranquil leaving that way.” He pauses. “You see, we do not think like those who are not Tranquil. Without a logically superior solution to the current state, there is no sense in altering it.”

What in the Void? The analytical part of Margo’s mind latches onto the problem with desperate ferocity. It has the merit of distracting her from the absent lichen and what that potentially spells for her. There is no way the damn thing grows this low in the valley — the climate is too warm for it.

“So where could they be?”

“I do not know,” Clemence states with admirable indifference.

Margo thanks him again for returning her satchel and walks back to their table. She stops at a short distance, assessing the changed ambiance. With the added crowd, the atmosphere in the tavern warms a little — either because the patrons have reached a critical degree of inebriation, or because the din of conversation allows a degree of privacy. When she looks over at her team’s table, she is surprised to see their ranks augmented by several new additions — including the anti-Chantry activist, her taciturn male companion, and an elven woman who looks like a younger and gentler version of Enchanter Minaeve. Margo tries to assess the nature of the collective interaction.

Well. If ever there were three method actors. Bull, in a voice that is either charmingly menacing or menacingly charming, recounts some completely fantastical — and, judging by the occasional shocked gasps and appreciative chuckles, dirty — story. While Margo cannot hear all the details, she surmises that the three principle figurants are a Chantry cleric, a noblewoman, and her chevalier. Dorian is sprawled in his chair, radiating the appearance of bored indulgence. And Solas is smiling his patented cryptic smirk, interjecting some occasional witticisms — which has a devastating effect on the elven redhead, who titters breathlessly and shoots doe-eyed glances at him.

Margo sighs internally. They most certainly do not pay her enough for this. She waits for Bull to finish the story, then covers the distance to the table, slipping into her new mask.

“Hey, boss.”

Bull looks up. “Blondie, pull up a seat. We were just waitin’ for you.”

Margo feels the glances of the newcomers on her, but keeps her attention on Bull.

“Got the room. But Lloyd needs to see the writ of authorization before we can start working.” There. The Ben-Hassrath should be able to read between the lines.

Bull gives her an almost imperceptible nod. “Sure thing, doll. We’ll do it in a bit. Got a sense of what might go over well with this crowd?”

There is something to the way Bull asks the question that puts Margo on alert. She isn’t sure if it’s the right move, but it’s not like she has many alternative options for reporting back — at least not with their new drinking buddies around. “Well...” she affects a speculative look, “I keep thinking that I wouldn’t mind trying my hand at that ballad we heard in Val Chevin.”

Something sharp passes in Bull’s eye. She also catches a small movement from Solas at the periphery of her vision. Dorian, too, is looking just a tad less indifferent. “Oh, you know the one I’m talking about. Sentimental, but pretty.” She turns to the new additions to their group, as if recounting for their benefit. “It’s the story about these two sisters, you see. They couldn’t be more different — one is beautiful and passionate, the other is rational and plain. One, everyone fights over, the other one is overlooked and forgotten.” Since there is no seat available, Margo perches on the edge of the table next to Solas and the redhead. Her hip brushes against his forearm, and he looks up from under the silly hat. Margo notes that his gaze takes a tad longer than usual on its way to meet hers — apparently distracted en route. He doesn’t move the forearm, either. Margo clears her throat. If she could kick him under the table, she would — the damn elf is having entirely too much fun with this persona. “Anyway. Their father is a very domineering lord, not letting the sisters have any freedom. So eventually, they run away, start a new life. Except a dashing prince rolls into town, sweeps the pretty sister off her feet, and offers to marry her.”

“Maudlin drivel so far,” the irascible Chantry denouncer sniffs.

“What happens to the other sister?” That’s the elven redhead, and the girl looks like she’s hanging on every word. Margo can’t help but feel a twinge of gratitude at her question. It saves her from proliferating more bullshit. She turns to the young woman and schools her features into what she hopes is a quizzical expression. “That’s the thing. The other sister just... disappears one day. And the tragedy of the ballad is that no one really notices.”

There is a pause.

“I may recall the song of which you speak, lethallan.” Solas smiles at her, but his eyes under the hat are sharp. “Was it not titled ‘Lost Serenity’? After the name of the forgotten sister?”

“That’s it!” Margo nods, and shoots Solas a smile — and she doesn’t even have to fake it. Clever elf appears to have gotten it.

“Oh, you speak the People’s language!” the redhead breathes. “I know very little myself.” She looks from Solas to Margo and then back again, her pretty green eyes troubled. “But you are not Dalish. Is the word ‘lethallan’ not used for kin? Oh! You two must be cousins!”

At this, Dorian is overcome with a truly spectacular coughing fit; Solas colors, his eyes flashing with surprised confusion; and Margo decides that she would be perfectly fine with a rift opening under her feet and swallowing her whole.

“The meaning can be variable, da’len, but you are right to assume that it signifies affinity,” Solas finally manages.

Margo is still stuck at “cousins.” She catches the Chantry critic’s eyes on her, and there is something peculiar to the woman’s expression — as if behind the irritable mask lurks the face of another.

Before she can puzzle out what she saw in the woman’s features, Margo’s attention is drawn by a rapidly approaching rhythmic clanking. Her head pivots in the direction of the noise. The others turn as well, with an assortment of confounded expressions.

The knight from earlier marches towards their table with grim determination, his eyes trained on Margo. She can feel her companions shift positions slightly, as if getting ready for a potential confrontation. She hops down from the table and pivots to face Sir Lancelot the Bizarre.

“I know you,” he announces, as he comes to plant himself in front of Margo. Up close, he is not quite as tall as he appears — but he still manages to tower over her. It’s distinctly hostile towering. Shit. What did Maile do this time? Please, let it not be that this guy is another notch in her host body’s belt. “Where is the demon?”

“You must be mistaking me for someone else,” Margo states cautiously. Right. Do not argue with the fellow having a psychotic episode, especially if said fellow is armed, armored, and looks like he is ready to smite some windmills. The French accent does dull the threat factor, at least.

“Hey, hey, hey, let’s not get carried away,” Bull’s voice is a mix of intimidation and cajoling. “You two know each other?”

Lancelot completely ignores Bull — which takes some doing. His hand shoots out with preternatural speed, and, had Margo not stepped out of his way at the last moment, would have closed around her throat. At this point, the table explodes in subtle but rapid reshuffling in response to the threat, but before Margo can further react, there is a muffled pop, like an exhaust boom — or distant thunder — and the aggressively minded Sir Lancelot incomprehensibly loses his balance and clatters to the floor. A few of the other patrons look in their direction, attracted by the commotion. Solas shifts in his chair, and Margo catches a whiff of ozone.

The knight springs back to his feet, but the fall seems to have jolted him out of whatever mental state was causing the hostility. His stance softens, but his gaze returns to Margo, with less anger than confusion.

“I... No. There can be no mistake. Unless...” He stands stock-still, his eyes peering into her like he is trying to drill a hole in her skull and take a peek inside. In the brighter light of the chandelier overhead, Margo suddenly notices details she had overlooked: the way his cheeks are hollowed out, the skin taut over the bones. His eye sockets are tinged with purple, and the whites of his eyes are bloodshot, as if he hasn’t slept in days. Margo feels a sudden twinge of sympathy for the armored sod, because he genuinely looks at the end of his rope. “I am Michel de Chevin. And while you claim you do not know me, your likeness has appeared to me before.” Margo blinks at this truly mystifying revelation. De Chevin stares at her with wild eyes. “I am on the trail of an ancient demon. And when I find him, I will kill him.”

Margo starts. Oh, shit.

“What does Blondie have to do with demons, knight?” Bull’s voice sounds a little unsettled.

“Nothing.” Solas turns from Bull to Sir Lancelot the Underslept and Murderous. “You have clearly misrecognized my friend, stranger. But would you not join us? Perhaps then you would share your story? We always seek to gather interesting tales to recount in our travels.”

The knight looks between Margo and Solas, clearly torn as to what to do.

“Ah... No. Forgive my intrusion. I... You are correct. I must have been confounded.” He drifts away slowly, like a sleepwalker. A few paces away he turns, gives Margo one last lingering stare, and then seems to mobilize himself and purposefully walks to the other side of the tavern.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you the impossibility of accurate translation.

Next up: A late night visitor



# Limited Resources

## Chapter Summary

In which Margo gives out a quest, and the team gets a nocturnal visitor.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The rest of the evening passes uneventfully. Bull spins the occasional story — mostly about war, or women, or both. Margo is silent and distracted, alternating between quiet dread over the loss of the Veil Key lichen, vague foreboding over the fate of the Tranquil, and utter befuddlement over Sir Lancelot the Gawky. Every time Margo's gaze drifts toward the corner of the tavern he occupies, she catches him eyeballing her. As the evening passes, the knight's expression is progressively solidifying into unmistakable hostility.

Her mood is not improved by the fact that mini-Minaeve — whose actual name is Diane, pronounced in the Orlesian manner — is so clearly enamoured with Solas's Robin Hood persona that she is practically falling off her chair in an effort to shorten the distance between them. Solas sticks to cryptically amiable, neither encouraging nor discouraging the flirtation.

Dorian, the bastard, is clearly finding all of this delightfully entertaining, and he keeps shooting Margo covert smirks. Fed up, Margo eventually kicks him under the table.

By the time Bull gives the green light to retire for the night, Margo cannot be out of there fast enough. Not that she has a clear sense of what to do about her sleeping predicament, but she decides that she'll burn that bridge when she comes to it.

As they gather their stuff to relocate upstairs, Diane mobilizes her courage, and, stumbling over her words, asks if Solas would like to "take a walk with her." Margo almost feels a twinge of sympathy for the girl. Useful as Baba's general advice on buses and men might be, it presents one with remarkably few desirable options. The alternative to running is waiting indefinitely at the bus stop — a thankless task if ever there was one. Maybe Diane has the right idea.

Margo doesn't linger to find out the end result of their exchange, slings her backpack over one shoulder, careful not to jostle the vihuela, and proceeds towards the stairs. She catches Solas's rather interrogative gaze on her, but ignores him. If he wants her blessing, he can go take a running jump.

Bull and Dorian are already walking ahead. There's a new kind of familiarity to the way the two carry themselves — the distance between them shorter, their movements unconsciously synchronized. Margo smiles to herself, probably a little sadly — but who's looking? At least someone is on the right course.

Margo's path upstairs puts her on a trajectory that forces her to pass de Chevin's table. Unsurprisingly, he's still planted there, like a nail in a board. As she walks by — studiously ignoring his antagonistic gawking — he catches her wrist. His hand is scalding hot — which makes Margo wonder whether the knight is running a fever. Great. Demented and pestilent.

“Sit, creature,” he grinds out. “Let the charades end.”

Well, then. Margo tries to disentangle herself, but there is no way to achieve it without making a scene. Bull and Dorian have already disappeared upstairs, and Solas, behind her, is still caught up with Diane. Bastards. Every single bloody one of them.

“Let go, and I’ll sit,” she tells Lancelot the Grabby with barely contained fury. If they do, in fact, have one Imshael in common, this is the final confirmation that the universe is out to get her. Because of all the people she could foresee sharing her predicament with, it just had to be thispsychotic asshat.

“Very well. Please, ‘my lady,’ do me the honor of sharing my humble table.”

Margo doesn’t acknowledge the sarcastic tone, yanks her wrist out of his grip, and sits in the opposite chair. She takes a long hard look at the knight in not particularly shining armor. Not all gold that glitters indeed, Baba.

“What do you want with me, Ser Knight?”

He leans in, his features hard. “Do not toy with me, demon. I should have guessed the moment I saw you. You take the girl’s face to torture me with what I have done no more.”

Oh Void take him, did he somehow come to the conclusion that she is Imshael? And here she thought this night could not possibly get any worse. Margo forces herself to work through the irritation — and fear, because, let’s face it, Sir Lancelot the Unreasonable is clearly a loose cannon — and raises her hands in a conciliatory gesture.

“Slow down. First of all, I am no demon. But I have a suspicion I know of which demon you speak.”

“Enough!” Sir Asshat smashes his fist against the table. Margo flinches back. She watches the muscles in his jaw move beneath the pale skin, which makes her conclude that he is grinding his teeth. Bad habit, teeth grinding. “Enough games, creature. If you think I shan’t run you through in front of witnesses, consider again.”

Margo represses the icy creep of fear. She shrugs instead. “You clearly haven’t yet, so let’s assume you’re going to hold off on the murdering, so we might have a chat first. You’re looking for Imshael?”

Lancelot the Trigger Happy blanches, his left hand balling into a fist. His right hand travels down, likely to the hilt of some hidden weapon. “You know whom I seek, abomination. You .”

Well, at least the Imshael commonality is confirmed. Margo narrows her eyes at him. “Now, why would you think that I am Imshael? That is what you think, right?”

De Chevin chokes out a bitter laugh. Then, suddenly, he slumps against the back of his chair — like a man who finally found his target, and can take a breath or two before getting to the stabbing and slashing part. “Because,” he responds in a strangely congenial tone, “you have tormented my dreams for nearly a year now. Since this is one of the faces you wear — as well you know — who else would you be?”

Oh crap. Margo swallows. It doesn’t take any particular brilliance to theorize the parallelism. If this guy is tangled up with Imshael, it is quite possible that not-Solas is to her what not-Maile, or someone who looks like not-Maile, is to Sir Asshat. Oh dear unmerciful universe, please do not let her “lover scorned” hypothesis be true. She doesn’t need that particular complication. Fucking

Maile.

“Look. I have never seen you before, and I have no idea why Imshael would use my face to terrorize you. But I’ve had the displeasure of coming across the insufferable bastard, and if it makes you feel better, he does the same to me. What I can tell you is that I am not Imshael, and killing me will put you absolutely no closer to your target.” She takes a breath, because all of this is delivered in rapid-fire succession. “Conversely, if you stop for a moment and tell me what happened to you, maybe we can be mutually beneficial.”

“More lies,” Sir Asshat offers, his feverish gaze fixed on Margo with implacable stubbornness.

Right. Time to change strategies. “How long since you slept?” she asks.

That seems to throw Sir Lancelot the Ornery for a loop. He frowns. “If you think you can disorient me with your cruelty, creature, you do not know me as well as you think.”

“Margo,” Margo corrects. “I would really prefer it if you referred to me as ‘Margo.’ I don’t think we are well enough acquainted for you to call me ‘creature.’”

That last bit completely flummoxes him, which is precisely what Margo was aiming for. When the knight errant gets off his predetermined cognitive rails, there are flashes of sentience in there.

“That is not your name.”

Well, at least he’s dropped “creature.” There’s an improvement.

“Irrelevant for the time being. Let me guess. You don’t sleep until you collapse from exhaustion, because every time you do, Imshael shows up and offers you some sort of choice. And no matter what you tell him, you still feel awful when you wake up. Does that sum it up?”

De Chevin’s jaw tightens. “Yes. And the only reason you know this…”

“... Is not because I am Imshael, but because he has done the same to me.”

Something in the knight’s posture shifts. “Why?” he asks at length. The question that follows is barely a croak. “How?”

Margo shakes her head. “Not so fast. We’ll trade stories, but first, you need to sleep. You’re in no state to actually listen, and I am not telling you anything until you stop threatening to stab me or call me names. Are we clear?”

He looks like he’s about to retort with more hostility, but then suddenly the fight goes out of him. De Chevin drops his face into his hands in a gesture so familiar Margo is almost tempted to give his shoulder a reassuring pat. “If I sleep ...” He trails off and shakes his head.

“If you don’t sleep, you will lose your mind — or what’s left of it, anyway — which will not get you any closer to your goal.” Margo hesitates. What Sir Lancelot the Dejected really needs is a task. Maybe she can redirect him. “I happen to know a bit of alchemy. And I also happen to be in a similar predicament. There are ways to cut oneself off from the dreams — I just need the right ingredients.” She extracts her botany journal from her back-pack, and leafs through to the page where she had sketched the red lichen Amund had shown her — the Veil Lock. “This grows on rocks, usually by the water. I cannot leave my companions — and I’m not going anywhere with you anyway, in case you decide to murder me in some dark alley — but if you find this for me, I could make a remedy that should protect you from the dreaming.” Never mind that the climate is likely too hot for either of the lichens.

“There are quicker ways to kill me than with poison you would have me procure for you,” he notes dryly.

“I’ll take the damn thing with you if you need someone to hold your hand,” Margo snaps, utterly done with the entirety of this evening.

He bristles. “I do not need ‘handholding,’ cre—”

Margo raises a finger. “Ah? What was that?”

“Lady Margo,” he grinds out. With the French accent, the emphasis in her name is on the last syllable. Margo almost chuckles. She supposes that Sir Asshat would not be amused by a retelling of Dumas’s novel on the eponymous French would-be queen and Catherine de Medici’s poison-laced scheming.

“Just Margo is enough,” she corrects, then taps the page of her journal. “According to my notes, the lichen is reddish and grows in oblong patches the size of a beer bottle bottom. And it should smell like paint when you rub it between your fingers.”

Lancelot the Tentatively Less Bloodthirsty gives Margo a long, dubious look. And then he sighs. “To be honest, you may be too peculiar to be the demon.” He cringes a bit at that. “Forgive me. That was ill-mannered of me...”

“Nicest thing you’ve said all evening.”

To give credit where credit is due, the fellow has the decency to look abashed. “My point is simply that if you are not Imshael, then perhaps my luck has finally turned. And if so, then perhaps Andraste put you on my path...”

“All well, lethallan?”

Well, took him long enough. Margo looks up at the elf, who has materialized by their table. She notes that his ears are suspiciously pink. Maybe things with mini-Minaeve didn’t go well — or maybe they went too well. Since she’s not about to spend intellectual energy scrying by ear color, she turns back to the knight errant, and raises her finger again. “Lichen first. Speculations about divine intervention after.”

De Chevin sighs. “Very well. I will strive to locate your... lichen.” He shakes his head, as if actually hearing the absurdity of his own words. “Andraste preserve me,” he mutters. Then he bows — a little stiffly — and marches off towards Lloyd the Pigeon Stool, presumably to settle his tab.

Solas, with a little nod of acknowledgement, glides towards the stairs. Margo gets up and falls in step next to the elf.

“I must admit I am impressed,” he notes pleasantly. “You have maneuvered the erratic knight from threatening to murder you to doing your bidding.”

Margo shrugs. “Nothing like appealing to crude self-interest. How much of the conversation did you overhear, exactly?”

Solas’s tone is suspiciously casual. “Enough to give me an idea that you and him share a unique predicament. Who were you to Michel de Chevin, I wonder, that Imshael would choose to wear your face in malice?”

Margo is about to point out that she has nothing to do with de Chevin whatsoever, but constantly disavowing Maile's legacy is as naive as it is unproductive. She ought to learn all she can about who the other woman had been — it's that, or being constantly blindsided. "You were eavesdropping?" she asks instead. She isn't sure whether she finds the idea amusing or obnoxious.

"I have good hearing," Solas parries. "And that is not an answer."

She looks at him then. There is something there, lurking behind the amiable mask. "At a guess? Someone he feels guilty about." Margo frowns. What is this line of inquiry of his, exactly? Is he teasing? "What about you, Solas? How has your night been? No evening walk?"

He looks confused, but then understanding dawns. "Ignoring the fact that she is a child, lethallan, I do not seek comfort from such passing encounters. Is your opinion of me so low that you expected me to entertain her offer?"

Margo notices that Solas's ears have gone pink again, and his expression is turning for the stormy. She smiles wryly. "My dear cousin, I find that the fewer expectations I have, the less I am likely to be disappointed."

Solas's eyes widen, but he smothers the reaction quickly, and when he speaks, his tone is academic. "It is a rather poor interpretation of what the term signifies. The correspondences between Elvhen and Common are often tenuous at best." He gives her an inscrutable look. "As to avoiding expectations, it is, undoubtedly, a wise approach."

"What would be a more accurate translation, then?" Maybe she can solve the pet name mystery once and for all.

Solas casts her a sideways glance, then looks straight ahead. He seems to hesitate, frowning at some internal conflict. "Such referents are often variable by context. One meaning is akin to 'kindred spirit,'" he says quietly, his gaze still adrift.

Margo's heart thumps a little painfully. "That's an... interesting turn of phrase, all things considered." Her thoughts stumble upon an utterly absurd conclusion — that he's an outworlder like her, somehow transplanted into an alien body — but she quickly dismisses the ridiculous thought. No. If anyone were ever of this world, it's Solas.

"It is merely a manner of speaking," he continues, his tone mild. "One that originally conveyed affinity beyond the confines of shared appearance or the commonalities of... affiliation. Although I fear the Dalish, in their usage, readily limit it to that."

Margo frowns, puzzled. She's read enough about the Dalish from the Genitivi to understand their predicament. Traditions lost, mode of subsistence transformed to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, preyed on by humans — or displaced towards the less-livable peripheries. It's arguably better than the segregated enclaves that the locals call "alienages" — like the name isn't a dead giveaway for humans' cultural attitudes. Of course, there would be language drift, too. Margo turns the thought over in her head. Something about the whole exchange nags at her. It's not like "authentic" Elvhen would be used anywhere — even if Solas dabbles in linguistics in his spare time, he might know the language from its echoes in the Fade, but that might not be much different from Champollion deciphering the Rosetta stone. An amazing feat, certainly, but hardly grounds to claim fluency.

They make it to the second floor of the tavern. There is another set of stairs at the end of the hallway, which she surmises leads to the attic. Margo shelves the thoughts for later analysis and turns her attention to more immediate problems.

“Solas, wait.” He stops, and pivots to face her, his expression curious. “I made a rookie mistake.” She inhales. “One of the Tevinters stole my alchemy satchel. It had the lichen I use to control the Dreaming.”

“Ah. This is why you sent de Chevin on a gathering expedition.” His lips quirk into a small smile. “Clever.”

Margo shakes her head. “Not the only reason — I also figured the man needs a task or he will go on a murdering spree. In the meantime, sleep is not in the cards for me just yet.”

Solas’s gaze finds hers, and lingers. “The alchemical solution is not the only one, as well you know.” Something about his tone sounds a whole lot less clinical than the conversation theoretically warrants.

“If you are referring to you sheltering me from the Fade while you forego sleep, then no.” She sighs. “I think the Veil Key was meant as... a prosthetic of sorts. To be used until I learn to do what it does by myself. It’s my own fault I’ve grown dependent on it. I will need to learn to go without it anyway — just... not right this minute.”

He seems to vacillate for a moment, another internal conflict fought, and decided. “Then let me guide you into the Dreaming when you are ready. I am familiar with plants such as your lichen. And I have seen how you deployed its properties and thus could help you replicate them. What protects you from Imshael is not the lichen itself, but what it enables you to do.”

Margo considers this. Objectively, it is a logical proposition. Except that he would have to follow her into what Amund has called her “weaving.” Margo tries to parse the complicated emotion. The riverbank, whatever it is, is intimately, inextricably her. Roots of her roots. Whatever essential distillate she has poured into its creation, she isn’t sure she is ready to admit another into the space.

“And you would sleep?” she asks cautiously, mostly by way of distraction from the other thoughts.

“Of course.” Something about the soft intimacy of that answer sends a shiver down her spine. Margo takes a sudden, shuddering breath. Solas’s eyes dart to her lips, and then drift down, before he very visibly forces himself to refocus. Ironically, this is the first time since donning her costume that Margo in fact feels somewhat exposed. She opens her mouth, intent on saying something to break the sudden silence. His eyes return to her lips, and he swallows, the movement seemingly incognizant.

“You are making me feel like a brightly colored fruit,” Margo finally manages.

Solas chuckles abruptly, jolted out of his trance. “Forgive me. My mind wandered.” The smile he gives her is entirely roguish, the effect exacerbated by the damnable hat. “I will admit that one does become sorely tempted to venture a taste.” His tone is light, but his eyes on her are not.

With a herculean effort not to turn into senseless putty, Margo purses her lips. “As long as we’re trading niceties, I find your disguise quite fetching too. The feather is to die for.” Except that she is fairly certain that the flash of desire in the elf’s eyes isn’t all on account of her getup. It seems at least equally related to their apparently shared penchant for poorly planned Fade experiments.

Her comment gets her another abrupt chuckle. “Perhaps I should adopt it permanently?”

“And leave a trail of broken hearts in your wake as you wander through Thedas? Have mercy!”

For some reason, Solas’s expression turns melancholy. “A rare and precious trait,” he sighs. “And one few can afford.” He regroups. “Come. Let us rejoin the other two before things get out of

hand.”

Margo frowns. “What do you mean, exactly?”

What he means becomes abundantly clear when they make their way up the rickety wooden staircase, and stop before the only door at the landing. In the sudden silence, her ears pick up quiet noises, but a suspicious absence of conversation. Oh.

“I do not believe they are too far along,” Solas says quietly.

“Wouldn’t it be kinder to leave them to it?” Margo responds. She pitches her voice low. If the walls have ears, she might as well make them work for it. “We could... ah... go look for the missing Tranquil? And on that note, thank you for accurately interpreting my story.”

Solas’s lips quirk into a private little smile. “I quite enjoyed your allegory, despite its gravity.” He raises an eyebrow. “As to looking for Tranquil... In the middle of the night? In a town under occupation by enemy forces? With unknown magics eroding the integrity of the Veil?”

“You make it sound very dashing.”

“I aimed for ill-considered, but the two are never far apart.”

The door flies open, with a somewhat tousled Dorian standing in the frame. There is a very visible flush to his cheeks. Through the opening, Margo notices Bull seated on the bed, mercifully in a state of no greater undress than usual.

“Oh, come in, you two. We can hear you milling about and flirting on the threshold, you know. Might as well resume the process out of earshot of the other residents.”

All things being equal, Dorian has a point, so Margo proceeds forward, Solas close on her heels.

Bull, with a completely unperturbed expression, gestures towards the two dormitory-style beds, covered in rudimentary straw pallets. “So. Let’s summarise. Solas, report. What did you learn.”

Solas sits, then moves over, making room for Margo. She could select the other bed but takes him up on the unspoken invitation instead.

“Alexius has retained some mages and some servants in the keep, but most are in the village. They are forbidden from practicing their magic unless explicitly directed.” His face turns grim. “All mages are encouraged to report suspicious actions undertaken by their fellows. And those accused are taken to the castle, not to be seen again within the village.”

Bull nods. “Yeah. They’re encouraging lateral surveillance. It’s a good idea if you don’t have the manpower to police vertically. Blondie?”

Margo quickly summarises her conversation with Clemence — this time without the charades — as well as the information about the writ of authorization she has managed to glean from Lloyde. Bull nods at the appropriate moments.

“A censure system, huh? Never works out well in the end, in my experience. The more you forbid something, the more people tend to want it. Strange about the Tranquil, though. We didn’t get any intel on them wandering around looking for a place to take them in, and Red never said anything either. Anyway. Not our top priority. Dorian, you sure that the entire contingent of Vints you’ve seen is new?”

“Yes. Whatever Alexius has been doing in the last month, it would appear that he completely rotated his staff. They are also... not the type of people I would have expected him to draw into his employ.” Dorian’s usually relaxed posture is substituted with a tense alertness. He takes a seat next to Bull, leans forward, and steeples his fingers in front of his lips, mulling something over. Margo watches as Bull reaches out and lets his massive hand rest on Dorian’s shoulder. The Qunari works his thumb into what Margo presumes is a knot in the mage’s back. Bull seems distracted as he does it, as if this newfound thing between them is its own, autonomous, barely acknowledged entity. Dorian casts Bull a brief glance, and continues with his musings, simply accepting the touch. “All the new recruits are paid mercenaries of some sort. In Tevinter, each house has its own trained troops — a relationship buttressed by a financial exchange, of course, but there is much more to it than that. One does not outsource one’s protection to hired cutthroats.”

“So Alexius has either exhausted his goodwill with his habitual defenders or foregone their services in the interest of greater anonymity,” Solas concludes.

Bull and Dorian nod at the same time. “Which tells us that, whatever the Vint’s up to, he’s being hush-hush about it,” Bull summarizes.

“Nor do I think the Council of Magisters has thrown its full support behind Alexius’s presence here,” Dorian adds.

“They’re unmarked,” Margo interjects, finally capturing the problem that had bothered her since seeing the nondescript soldiers. Bull gives her a curious look. “You know, the soldiers — they’re identifiable as troops, but they’re not identifiable as someone’s troops. They are well-equipped. But — correct me if I’m wrong — I saw no sigils on the armor, no colors, no military company signs. Nothing that identifies them — either with a nation, or a noble, or an organization. It’s like...” Margo waves her hand, trying to capture the thought. “... They’re an abstract army.”

Bull nods slowly. “That’s right. Useful tactic if you want plausible deniability. Or if you really don’t want anyone to find out who’s footing the bill.”

When a knock sounds at the door, Margo starts. She steals a glance at Bull. The Qunari seems entirely unsurprised by their late guest. Dorian gets up to let in their mysterious nocturnal visitor. Once inside, the newcomer throws back his hood, his eyes darting furtively around the room. Margo recognizes the man who accompanied the irascible Chantry-denouncer from earlier.

“I am afraid our accommodations are not much to look at, but please do sit.” Dorian gestures towards the free bunk.

The man proceeds to the unoccupied bed and lowers himself on the pallet. Margo guesses he must be in his sixties, with a bony, weather-worn face and dark brown eyes that tilt downward at the corners, giving him a mournful sort of look. He does not strike her as a mage — he is trim, but in a bookish, dusty sort of way. And he looks utterly terrified — so terrified in fact that his teeth chatter visibly. Bull hands him a flask. The newcomer accepts it with trembling hands and takes a long swig, not even flinching at what Margo knows from personal experience is an absurdly strong brew.

“I suppose formal introductions are in order. My name is Brand,” he finally says, once the trembling is under control. Brand’s speech is cultured, though the Scottish brogue is a little disconcerting. “In a previous life, one of the Ostwick Circle’s archivists.”

“Brand here is trying to organize the mages who aren’t supporting Alexius,” Bull explains.

“Organize,” their visitor parrots bitterly. “How can ye organize a flock of terrified sheep, all



convinced that the slaughterhouse is yon spring pasture, no matter what their eyes tell them?" There is an edge to his voice, equal measures anger and despair. "There's nothing left to organize." He shakes his head.

"You're here, aren't you?" Bull answers calmly. "You wouldn't be taking the risk if you didn't think there was something we could do to help."

Brand sighs. "Dinnae talk to me about risk, young man. At this point, it's just a drowning man grasping at straws — but it's better than doing nothing. Those Red Jenny Friends, or however they call themselves, told me to be on the lookout, said ye'd make contact." He rubs his face with both hands. "I wasn't sure it was ye until the lass's story." He points his chin in Margo's direction. "Risky, it was. Thank Andraste Linnea is a numptie." He shrugs out of his cloak and lays it across his lap. "D'ye like to know how the story ends, lass?"

Margo nods cautiously.

"It ends like this. The betrothed turns out to be far worse than the father — the father, at least, wasn't barmy. And the other sister floats up in the gutter one morning, missing her head."

"Is this a metaphor?" Dorian asks, frowning.

"Wish that it were. If yer organization had shown up a month ago, ye might have tipped the scales for us. But at this stage, it'll be lucky if we can get a few out alive."

"Then let's not waste time." Bull shifts on his bunk, straightening to his full height. "We've got a unit in place — ready to get working. You got some candidates for extraction?"

After a moment of hesitation, Brand fishes out a piece of paper from inside his folded cloak. "Ye met Linnea earlier. She's from Ostwick, like me. Ostwick was calm in comparison to other places, but don't think the Templars didn't take their fun behind closed doors. Still. I would have never thought she'd betray her own brothers and sisters. She has become the magister's eyes and ears among the mages." He unfolds the paper on his knees. "I work as her scribe, so I take a peek at the reports. I warn the folks whose names appear — not that it does much good. She has a system for counting infractions. 'Infractions of speech,' 'infractions of action'... Got a new one recently: 'emotional infraction' — that's when you fail to smile and clap enough at the mention of Tevinter's progressive stance on mages."

"I am surprised that Alexius would demand such... exactitude," Dorian notes.

Brand shakes his head. "I know nothing about that — I've only seen the magister a handful of times meself. But I know Linnea. And I know what happens when someone's name makes it to the list." He shudders. "I keep waiting for that midnight knock at me own door, you know. I'm sure it's just a matter of time now."

"How can she do this?" The question comes out before Margo has a chance to hold her tongue. But the horror of the middle-of-the-night knock is the ingrained genetic memory of her matriline. Those branches of her kinship tree that extended farther east got pruned by iterations of state repression. When she and Jake were older, Baba told them the stories. The sort that ended with, "And the next morning, all his things were left behind, but Uncle Mihail — well, no one ever saw him again."

Their guest nods at her, as if sensing her comprehension. "At first, I thought it was misplaced vengeance against her peers. But I think she's gone barmy with petty power. If the Tranquil are any indication."

Bull frowns. “We heard they’ve been vanishing, with no one noticing.”

Their guest shifts uncomfortably. “Ye have to understand how a Tranquil thinks, see — otherwise ye wouldn’t think twice about it. I counted many Tranquil among my colleagues — archival work is the sort of thing they excel at. Tranquil don’t have much intrinsic motivation. They can decide something based on its objective merits, but not because it’s something they want for themselves. Ye have to... give them a little nudge. The magister made vague declaration that they ought to leave, but that’s like telling rocks to move. Won’t spur them into action.”

Margo is about to ask what did, but Solas beats her to it. “And yet, their numbers thin with every passing week? What causes this?”

Brand exhales between his teeth. “Linnea. She’s been passing notes to them. It’s always just a few at a time. The note tells the tranquil to leave immediately, usually at night. Tells them to go to a specific rendezvous point where their ‘resettlement’ team will meet them.” Brand clasps his hands in his lap. “Tranquil aren’t all the same, you know. If ye were to get to know them, ye would see that there are differences. Some might be talented with runes. Others might have a knack for alchemy. Research. Archiving. Astronomy. Each note mentions the specific talent a Tranquil might have and says it’s needed in Denerim. Always Denerim. Well, I happen to have a friend in the Denerim refugee assimilation office. After weeks of this, I admit I became suspicious, so I wrote her.” Brand shakes his head. “They never got a single Tranquil. Not a one.”

“Interesting. But our priority is still the mages,” Bull comments.

“And mine. I wouldn’t have taken the gamble with ye lot, if I weren’t desperate.” Brand’s eyes dart between the four of them. “Please, understand. Diane is like a daughter to me. I know ye people probably wonder why a human would care, but I practically raised the lass. She was a wee bairn when they brought her to the Circle from my village. Never met her parents, but I knew her grandparents. Good folk. I thought she’d be safe from Linnea. Shows ye how much of an old eejit I was.” He turns to Solas, his expression pleading. “Please. I know she took a shine to ye. Help me get her out.” He takes a shuddering breath. “Her name is on the latest list.”

Margo’s eyes quickly dart to the elf. She doesn’t envy him the complicated position he has been placed in. Solas’s expression remains carefully neutral, except his ears are turning alarmingly pink once again. Margo isn’t sure if this is embarrassment or anger.

“If only there were a cure for mindless fanaticism,” Dorian remarks acerbically. “Who else is on your overzealous colleague’s list of ‘infractors’?”

As it turns out, there are two more potential targets: a male elven mage by the name of Lysas, and another human mage named Talwyn.

From there, Bull and Brand settle into discussing the logistics of extraction — the possibility of getting the mages out by ferry, the practicalities of transfer and protection, and the prospects of setting up long-term support. Margo suggests they add Clemence to the roster of endangered locals, but the Qunari shoots the proposal down even before she has a chance to fully present it. “Limited resources, Blondie. Gotta prioritize. If we can manage another run, I’ll consider it.” She glances at Dorian and then Solas for support but is met with quietly apologetic looks. Both seem to agree with Bull.

Of course they do. In different circumstances, with enough argumentation, she might convince them. But there is no time — or opportunity. As it stands, both are, first and foremost, mages — and no one likes unpleasant reminders. Margo tries not to seethe about it and fails.

And, of course, it turns out they're on an incredibly short timetable — Linnea's report is slated to go to Redcliffe castle the next evening.

“Ye'll have to create a distraction,” Brand pleads. “Something to draw enough attention to ye to let me get the others past the gates. As long as not all eyes are on me, I'll sneak them out. If yer people can protect them from there...”

Bull nods solemnly. “They'll be in good hands.”

Before Brand leaves, he extracts a rolled up scroll from his cloak. “Thought ye'd find this useful,” he says, handing the vellum to Bull. “It's a fake, but a good one. I drew it up before coming up here — let the ink set for the night. It should pass Lloyd's scrutiny.”

Margo doesn't need to see the scroll to know what it is. Bull passes it to Dorian. “Wanna forge a signature?”

Dorian squints at the vellum and nods. “That, I can certainly do.”

Once the door closes behind their guest, Bull turns to Margo.

“All right, Blondie. How are you on politically offensive songs?”

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by the joys of lateral surveillance.

Next up: Some unforeseen alchemical effects and unpleasant confined spaces.

# Treacherous Terrains

## Chapter Summary

In which Margo makes a dubious decision, and ends up in a dark place.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They go over the practicalities, and the rest of the crew settles into beds soon enough, but Margo cannot bring herself to consider sleep. She procrastinates. Once the lights are out, she opens the hatch and climbs to the roof. Between the prospect of Imshael's visitation and the necessity to play political bait the next day, she doesn't quite know what to do with herself.

She is simultaneously too tense and too emotionally exhausted to linger on the conundrum of Diane's crush on Solas — which, provided all goes well, will only be reinforced by the whole savior dynamic. She kicks the thought vigorously under the long-suffering rug, and she pictures herself stomping on it for good measure. There. All packed. There is enough on her plate without misplaced jealousy. It's not like she has any claims on the elf anyway.

Still. For a few minutes she somehow expects Solas to join her, but he does not — either taking her excuse about needing fresh air at face value, or, because, as she is beginning to suspect, the Fade is as essential to him as air and water.

The hatch leads to a slanted, shingled roof, and Margo sits cross-legged, back propped against the warm bricks of a chimney. From her perch she can see the entirety of Redcliffe — the ghostly outlines of houses, the orange glow of the occasional lit window, and the dark, looming shadow of the keep in the distance. All of it beneath the glow of alien stars. A soft breeze worries her hair, bringing the smell of the lake, interlacing with the scents of woodsmoke, fir resin, and manure.

She considers what is ahead of her. Bull's plan is, as usual, simple. In the early evening, when the crowds begin to gather, they will present the writ to Lloyde. And then it's up to Margo to walk a political tightrope: piss off the Vints enough to draw them in, but not enough to get herself arrested or kicked out immediately. "Make it ambiguous," Bull cautioned. "We need to draw attention, not get ourselves kicked out." If a confrontation happens, Dorian will step in, and they all rebrand themselves as his retinue. But Bull is hoping it won't get to that and that they will get away with a stern talking-to from Lloyde. Meanwhile, all the action should make Brand and the escapees the least of anyone's trouble.

To say she has a bad feeling about it all would be the understatement of the era.

Margo's attention is drawn to the sound of a rhythmic clatter — one that is somehow familiar. She peers into the semi-darkness. By the glow of the giant moon, the lone figure stands out in sharp relief against the whitish gray of the cobblestones.

Apparently, Sir Asshat is on his way back. He comes to a halt some fifteen feet away from the entrance to the tavern below and looks up.

"Who is up there?" he calls out, his voice rough. "Show yourself."

Margo hesitates. Oh well. No point playing possum. “How goes your quest for the lichen, Ser Knight?” she asks. Hopefully he isn’t carrying a ranged weapon. If ever there were an opportunity to get away with a quiet murder...

“Ah.” De Chevin’s tone is cool. “Is crouching in the shadows like a corrupted spider an intentional strategy? This town is full of twitchy characters. One might not think twice before sending an arrow into the dark.”

Margo gets lower to the shingles, just in case. “You say the nicest things,” she retorts, matching his tone.

If throat clearing could sound annoyed, what follows from below would certainly qualify as an example of it. “I found your lichen. At least judging by the stench. Would you care to come down and confirm that this vile thing is what you sent me for?”

“So you could stab me in the throat and be done with it?” Margo chortles. “Not a chance. How about I meet you in the tavern?”

“The door is bolted.”

“Fortunately, I presume I can open it from the inside, no?”

The figure hesitates for a second. “Very well. I will wait.”

It takes her a few minutes to sneak back into the room, make her way to the door through the snoring darkness, and descend the three flights of stairs. The bottom floor is mercifully deserted. For a brief second, Margo considers what this means. There will be no one to call for help in the case that Sir Asshat is back to his bloodthirsty ways. Then again, Margo puts her chances of surviving the next day to a multiple of zero, so at least this way she’ll die without the additional embarrassment of having to sing.

Sir Lancelot the Forager is correct. The door is indeed barred by a plank. Margo lifts it off its brackets quietly. De Chevin proceeds inside with a curt nod in her direction. She notes that his boots make squishy sounds as he advances. There is a distinct algae smell to him.

The knight selects a seat at a nearby table and lowers himself into it with visible exhaustion. Margo frowns. Maybe the lichen put up a fight?

“Here,” he says, unwrapping a handkerchief that once upon a time might have been white. Margo looks. At its center are multiple fragments of a red lichen. It smells like turpentine.

“That’s the one,” she says cheerily. “You only found the single specimen?”

Sir Asshat fixes her with an irritated glare. He looks like he might have more developed opinions on the subject of the lichen’s uniqueness, but he limits himself to a laconic yes. He points to the other chair, and Margo proceeds to sit. She supposes it’s the least she can do. He did somehow procure the correct lichen, after all.

“Now, I would like some answers,” he states. “How have you survived?”

Margo shrugs. “Since I’m not sure which incident of me almost dying you are referring to, I will tell you about the most recent one. About a month ago, I had a close brush with death. The experience altered my memory. I have recovered some of it since, but only tiny fragments. I remember very little of my past, and entire stretches are blank.”

The lie comes easily.

Sir Asshat blinks slowly, but the original expression of shock is quickly replaced with one of undiluted suspicion. “A convenient turn of events,” he comments.

“Not especially.”

“And as a result of this memory loss, you have joined a troop of wandering troubadours?”

Margo considers what the most expedient strategy for dealing with Sir Lancelot the Suspicious might be. On the one hand, he is perhaps one of the only people she has met that might shed some light on Maile’s past. Not to mention that, as far as Imshael is concerned, they are de facto in the same camp. It would behoove her to make an ally of him. On the other hand, something about the fellow just rubs Margo the wrong way. Still. Being infantile about it just because Sir Asshat irritates her on principle doesn’t get her particularly far.

“It’s not a bad life,” she evades.

De Chevin chuckles dryly. “Forgive me if I fail to be convinced.”

“By which part? That I almost died? Or that I lost my memories? Or that being a minstrel is a decent living?”

“Frankly, any of these. But your claims to amnesia are especially dubious. In particular as a result of yet another near death.” His expression is grim. For a moment, the knight looks like he is about to add something else. Then the impulse passes, and he clams up again.

Screw it. Margo stands, and, to the utter stupefaction of Sir Lancelot the Unsuspecting, lifts the hem of her shirt to reveal her abdominal scar. “Does this look life-threatening enough to you?”

De Chevin turns an alarming shade of red and quickly averts his gaze. “I... Ahm. You didn’t...” He clears his throat. “Yes. That sort of wound is hardly survivable.”

Margo lets go of the hem and sits back, suddenly exhausted beyond measure. Will this day never end? “And from the scar you should be able to tell that it is relatively recent. In this instance, I survived because there was a very skilled healer nearby.”

The knight gives her a cautious look. At length, apparently assured that no other items of clothing are intending to rearrange themselves to great rhetorical effect, de Chevin ventures a comment. “It does not explain Imshael.”

There, at least, Margo needs not lie. “It started with a draught. An alchemy test. Called Imshael’s Bargain.”

De Chevin has the decency to look outraged. “Someone would make you drink such a thing on purpose? ”

“Yes,” she says simply.

He mulls this over quietly. The pause gives Margo time to decide on the next steps of her strategy. Whatever else this guy is, he is clearly a man of action. Which is to say, someone whose excess purposefulness should be channelled towards peaceful ends.

“I would know more of your encounters with the demon,” he finally says, and his voice has lost some of its defensive edge.

“And I yours,” Margo answers, matching his milder tone. “But not tonight. As I said, I am not sharing stories until you sleep.”

De Chevin looks like he is about to protest, and then his eyes fall on the lichen. His gaze morphs from appalled to horrified.

“You aren’t suggesting...”

Before he can finish, Margo tears off a small piece of the reddish stuff, pops it into her mouth, and swallows. The taste is beyond vile. It’s like ingesting turpentine laced with vomit. She gags, blinking tears out of her eyes. “Oh, fuck me,” she croaks.

De Chevin makes a choked noise at the profanity, and takes a turn for the crimson. Great. A prude.

“Do you at least believe me now that I am not trying to poison you?” Margo finally manages to ask around the gagging reflex.

“Not at all,” he says.

If she thought that screaming at him would help, she would. “Do you think I’m eating this for my own amusement? The only reason I am putting up with it is that it’s preferable to Imshael.”

That, somehow, seems to get through. De Chevin considers the lichen with queasy horror.

“How do I know you haven’t taken an antidote before?”

Margo shrugs through a painful stomach cramp. “You don’t. In fact, I don’t know that this won’t kill me. But I’m willing to take the risk. And if that doesn’t tell you how I feel about Imshael, I don’t know what will.” She forces herself to breathe slowly. At length, the pain subsides. “I’m also not forcing you to take it. You can make up your own mind.”

He glares at her. “Oh, I have a choice, do I?” De Chevin barks a laugh, the sound brittle.

“Yes.”

“Why should I trust you?”

Whatever else he is, the knight is not the crafty type. Margo can read his intent clearly enough — and the scales are not tipping in her favor. She is going to have to do better than this if she wants Sir Lancelot the Unwilling to do what she needs him to do.

“Fine,” Margo says. She forces herself to meet his gaze, and hold it. “You are right. I have an ulterior motive.”

Lancelot the Vindicated looks momentarily triumphant. His sword hand travels, once again, to his side.

Margo leans in, pitching her voice to a quick whisper. “My colleagues and I are trying to rescue several mages from Redcliffe whose fate is probably going to be worse than death if we don’t.” She winces internally at the cliché, but banks on the idea that bombastic utterances should work well on knights errant the multiverse over. “And I’m hoping you and I might help each other.”

De Chevin’s expression takes a turn for the incredulous. “And who, exactly, are you and your colleagues?”

Margo shakes her head. Her stomach cramps again. She forces to keep her expression to neutral,

lest he misinterpret it as another lie. “I can’t tell you that. Listen. Things... are probably going to get unpleasant here tomorrow. I’d recommend getting out before that happens. But I need you to do me a favor.”

“Would you have me collect another poisonous plant for the road?”

Well, at least he’s finding his sense of humor. Small favors and all that. “No. I need you to escort someone out of here and to safety. You shouldn’t have too much trouble with it, I don’t think.”

De Chevin frowns. “Whom?”

“Clemence. The Tranquil from the tavern.”

“Why the Tranquil? I thought your concern was with mages.”

“My team’s priority is the mages. But the Tranquil are in just as great a danger. Except no one will lift a finger to help them, because... you know. Tranquil.”

Margo grits her teeth against the next cramp. Her mind races. The fucking lichen is toxic, no doubt about it. Amund never mentioned the dosage. She should have taken less. Or perhaps it needed to be treated first — likely boiled in milk. Like aconite. Other plants too. Her mind is too focused on anticipating the next wave of searing pain to remember which.

“You are unwell,” de Chevin notes, his expression suddenly alarmed.

An observant knight. What’s not to like? “Yes. If you take the lichen, boil it in milk first. Or soak. But better boil.” She sways, and grabs the table for stability. “Takes care of toxin, keeps effects.” The words come out slurred.

“You need a healer!”

The cramp passes slowly. Margo’s eyes refocus. “Clemence. Please. Get him out.”

“I... Where?”

The next cramp tears through her and doubles her over. Cold sweat drips down, stinging her eyes. The tips of her fingers go numb. That’s it, then. In a brief moment of clarity, Margo almost laughs. A stupid way to go, but one dies as one lived. At least, no singing.

“Haven,” she manages. After that, the world fractures into nothing but pain — and then, mercifully, darkness.

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Margo wakes up in something that she initially identifies as a coffin. There are rough wooden planks under her back. It’s quiet, dark, and smells of mops. Her mind is sluggish and fuzzy, but it still stumbles over the juxtaposition: was she buried with a mop? There are certainly traditions on Earth where burial sites would contain something pertinent to the deceased — anywhere from tools of their trade, to coins to pay the ferryman, to, say, a couple of slaves and a wife.

But why a mop?

Margo tries to open her eyes, then immediately squeezes them shut — it feels like someone is trying to drive needles into her brain. When the pain passes, she cautiously opens one eye, then the other, and turns her head. A greenish orb floats about three feet off the ground. It illuminates some



mops, a broom or two, an assortment of buckets, and Solas.

“Sleep well?” he asks calmly. Margo blinks, trying to focus on his face in the ghostly glow. The elf’s expression is collected, but his eyes are pinched at the corners in a way that makes her conclude that he is absolutely, utterly livid.

She gathers her strength, and forces herself to tilt into a sitting position. On a scale from one to ten, where one is waking up refreshed after a long restful sleep, and ten is the absolute worst hangover in the history of humans’ experiments with ethanol, she decides she’s at about a seven. She props her back against the wall and almost jumps out of her skin when a mop clatters to the floor. In the wake of its fall, the silence is deafening.

“So,” Margo ventures, then winces. Her throat feels raw. “I see we are continuing the fine tradition of you putting me back together.” She tries to smile.

“You are amused?” Solas asks, the polite veneer barely veiling the anger beneath. “If I had not decided to follow you downstairs, I would have likely been too late.”

Margo sighs. There will be no skirting the confrontation on that one. And she supposes the elf has a point. “I miscalculated with the lichen,” she admits. “But it was that or have de Chevin act on his suspicion that I am Imshael.”

Solas, seated against the opposite wall, shifts to a cross-legged position and leans forward. His hands are clasped in his lap in what looks like a death-grip. He peers at her. His eyes in the greenish glow are the color of storm clouds.

“Let us, for the moment, disregard the fact that you chose to meet someone destabilized by lack of sleep who believed you to be his enemy, in the dead of night and with no witnesses to stay his hand. Tell me, was poisoning yourself truly preferable to allowing me to assist you?”

Oh. So that’s what it’s about. Margo frowns. “Hold on. Since you were creeping around and eavesdropping, you are now in the unique position to let me know what happened after I lost consciousness. Why are we in a broom closet?”

Solas throws his hands up in frustration. “Because I thought you would not wish to explain to the Iron Bull why you chose to ingest a toxin in avoidance of sleep. I doubt that talk of ancient demons haunting you would earn his goodwill. Since any lie I could have woven would only have complicated the situation, and I needed a place to heal you...” He gestures with his hand. Voila. Mops.

Margo nods cautiously. “Thank you for that.” They sit in tense silence for a few moments. “For the record, I did not take the lichen because I thought it was a better alternative to your help.”

Solas’s expression grows flinty. “Did you not? Before you knew of its effects, you did it readily enough.” He glares like he is willing her to challenge his explanation. And, if Margo is absolutely honest with herself, the elf is not entirely wrong. Whatever he sees in her expression, his eyes widen, something precariously close to shock passing over his features. Then his face shutters, and he averts his gaze.

Shit. Sugarcoating this will either lead to a lie — and Solas will certainly recognize it as such — or to a species of “it’s not you, it’s me,” which is arguably even worse. Margo breathes out. Fine. No sugarcoating then. In for a penny, in for a pound.

“Solas, bear with me for a moment.”

He turns back to face her, and Margo freezes. The pleasantly polite mask is back. Ah. Well, if there is nothing to lose at this point, then the least she can do is be honest. “You’re right,” she says, forcing herself to hold his gaze. “I feel ambivalent about your help, but not for the reasons you might think.”

“And what reasons would you impute to me?”

“I don’t impute anything. I can only explain to you the source of my ambivalence as I experience it.”

“There is no need,” he says stiffly, and turns away again.

“Actually, there is a need, and I should have done it sooner.” Margo forces herself to step back from the maelstrom of emotions — because they’re creeping into her voice and making it tremble. How can anyone think analytically through this shitshow? “There is a huge structural imbalance between us, by virtue of our respective natures.”

Solas turns back to her slowly, his expression still as a statue’s. Whatever he was expecting her to say, this was not quite it.

Well, she’s gotten this far, no point in turning tail now. “I am at an enormous disadvantage. Because let’s face it, I know very little about you, beyond the mask you craft — yes, even with me.” He looks like he’s about to protest, but Margo shakes her head. “Please, let me finish. We all wear masks. I lay no claims to what’s beneath yours. Over time, I may come to know what that is, or I may not. But that’s not the point. The point is that I know very little about me. Not who my body was, not what strange synergistic effects arise from my dislocation into it, not what it means that I am able to access the Fade the way I do.” She takes a breath. “And as I discover it, the process takes something of the old me and reshapes it.”

The silence in the broom closet is so thick she can hear the mice scurrying in the walls. She forces herself to meet Solas’s stare — and consciously stops herself from trying to interpret his expression. “You are an expert on the Dreaming, but more than that, I think you truly love the Fade. It is a source of delight and curiosity and solace — no pun intended. And I get that. I certainly can understand intellectual curiosity. But in this case, insofar as my fumbling around in the Fade is just an object of conceptual interest for you, please realize it also happens to be a very intimate part of my... becoming whatever it is that I’m becoming. And I’m not saying that, were our roles reversed, I might not feel the same about wanting to unravel the puzzle — I probably would — but...” She trails off.

Solas is still staring at her, his face unreadable. For a brief moment in the eerie glow, his eyes look bottomless. “You think I offer aid because of idle curiosity?”

“Not idle. But still one of the sources behind the motivation.” Margo shuts her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. They do not share the idioms that would allow her to articulate this more precisely, but there is no going back now. Might as well get the rest of it out on the proverbial table. “The nature of the Dreaming, as I understand it, is such that you helping me means that you come to see me... ah... under magnification, if that word makes sense to you. Very close-up. But that gaze is necessarily one-sided.”

Margo looks at the elf again. The longer the seconds stretch, the harder it becomes to break eye contact. She briefly considers the predicament of the rabbit caught in the glare of headlights.

Solas exhales sharply. “And you believe that I would not respect your wish should you choose to keep the curtain drawn? That I would exploit this imbalance and...” he breaks off. She sees his

throat work around the ending of the utterance. “Force myself into your mind?” he finishes. There is a brittle edge to his question. That was not her meaning, but the elf has certainly identified the worst-case scenario extrapolation of the power disbalance. Margo watches him, trying to puzzle out what experiences might lurk behind his shocked anger. For a second, he seems much older than he looks. No, not older. Ancient. Or, rather, outside of time entirely. Margo tries to shake away the illusion.

“In this case, intention doesn’t matter. It is the structure of the encounter.” What she really wants to say is that a culture in a petri dish can’t exactly stare back. She shudders. Now there’s a horrifying image. Instead, Margo keeps to the abstract explanation. “You cannot will away the power differential — it is built-in. Intellectually, I know that it would be both stupid and wasteful not to seek your help with understanding the Fade — I remember Dorian’s comment about how rare somnari are. But it places us in an awkward relationship — at best, as mentor and student, and at worst, as researcher and experimental animal.” Margo sighs, and looks down at her hands. “That’s why I am ambivalent. The alchemy allows me to even out the playing field a little. I still can’t meet you as an equal, but it changes the dynamic enough to make it palatable for me.”

Solas looks like he is about to say something in response, but he presses his lips into a tight line instead. Margo sighs. Oh well. Why stop now? She looks the elf square in the eyes. “And in case you’re racking your brain as to why I would wish to even things out with you, it is because the alternative is...” She fishes for an analogy. “It makes for barren soil. Nothing will grow on it. Nothing healthy, anyway, not in the long run.”

Solas mouths a soft “oh,” the sound barely audible. The glowing orb sputters and momentarily blinks out of existence, but then stabilizes again. For a brief second he looks absurdly young, but the illusion is likely a trick of the light. And then his expression turns wistful, with the echoes of some timeless, irresolvable heartbreak.

“There is no solving this conundrum for us then,” he says quietly. “Perhaps it is as well. If you allow me to pursue your metaphor, even if we had the time to alter the terrain, I fear the broader landscape we inhabit will never be hospitable for the sort of thing you seek to cultivate.”

Margo crosses her arms over her chest, at this point in mild exasperation. It would seem that the elf’s bad habit of finding the nearest fatalistic sinkhole to leap into is solidly entrenched. “Do not confuse barren soil with inhospitable landscape. All sorts of things thrive in inhospitable landscapes.” At Solas’s unconvinced expression, Margo chuckles. “Say, lichen.”

The analogy has the merit of propelling him out of his morose brooding, and straight into aggrieved incredulity. “Do you suggest that this,” he gestures between them, “is akin to a lichen? At best unpalatable, and at worst toxic?”

Margo chuckles. “Depends on your approach. Alternatively, lichen are also resilient and potent, with a range of intriguing, albeit sometimes unexpected properties. Not to mention that they are, in fact, composite organisms — different beings symbiotically tangled up with one another into a single whole.”

A flash of wry amusement — and, for the briefest of instants, something that bears a suspicious resemblance to hopefulness. “An interesting perspective,” Solas comments finally. His lips quirk. “‘Composite organisms.’ Hmm. You will have to tell me more of this when we have the opportunity.” She’s not sure whether this is pure scientific curiosity or double entendre. Or, likely, both.

She gets to her feet slowly. The elf follows her up from his seated position, and suddenly, with both of them upright, the space feels impossibly narrow. Why is it that all of their complicated

conversations happen in awful, uncomfortable places? Undead-infested bogs, mop-infested closets...

He makes no move to leave. "It is early still — the others are most probably asleep..." There is something almost tentative to his voice. "And on the subject of unpredictable effects, your body still requires healing for the residual toxicity."

Margo nods in acquiescence. "Could I request a cleaning spell as well? In the interest of minimizing potential questions about... undesirable topics?"

"Of course." Solas brings his hands up and lets his palms rest on her bare shoulders. The scent of ozone intensifies, and the magic ripples across her skin in two rapid waves. Of all the spells she's seen him cast, Margo decides that the built-in dry cleaning is her favorite.

Solas retains a small frown as he examines her.

"What is it?" Margo asks suspiciously.

"If I may?" Solas asks, and before she can figure out what he is intending to do, he begins to unbraid her hair. Considering the previous evening, Margo supposes she's sporting the Medusa look. Not exactly appropriate for a minstrel, unless turning the audience into stone is part of the act.

His fingers are quick, but gentle, and Margo finds her focus drift a little at the quiet intimacy of his touch.

"I fear I have no hidden talents for any intricate arrangement beyond a simple plait," Solas muses, as he considers what to do with the unmanageable mane of blond strands.

Margo cocks an eyebrow, reluctant to move too much lest his thumbs stop rubbing little circles around her temples. "And failing to achieve advanced mastery, you decided to give up entirely and shave your head."

That gets her a surprised little laugh. "One does strive to avoid mediocrity."

Margo looks up. "We're in a broom closet. No one will ever know. Go ahead. Try a plait."

Another chuckle. After a small hesitation, Solas leans in, gathers her hair over one shoulder, and sets his fingers to the task of braiding. His brows are drawn in a frown, but Margo watches his lips quirk with barely suppressed amusement. The sight proves distracting, and Margo searches for something safer to look at. All she comes up with are more mops. At length, she hands Solas a spare piece of leather cord from her pocket, and he secures the end of the plait. He gives the overall result a critical once-over.

He doesn't look convinced. "Does it not win your approbation?"

"It does," Solas shrugs, and tucks a loose strand behind her ear. Then he pauses, as if considering some complex existential problem. "I fear I find myself more partial to the tousled mess. It invites one to speculate what other circumstances might achieve a similar effect," he comments casually.

Margo's mind, ever eager to generate conceptual models, conjures a broad variety of possibilities. For some reason, not a single one involves anything reasonable: like, say, fighting demons. She shakes her head. "Do you ever run out?"

"Do I ever...?"

“The flirts. I’m just curious. Do you ever find yourself reaching for one and coming up empty-handed? ‘Oh no, used them all up again, must resupply’ — that sort of thing?”

Solas smothers a cheeky smirk. “It has not happened yet. Would you prefer I were more sparing?”

Bastard. “This broom closet is entirely too small for you, me, and your ego. Shall we go pilfer breakfast from the kitchen?”

Solas hesitates. He takes a small step forward, his face suddenly very close to hers. Margo’s lips part involuntarily. The impulse to bridge the distance and kiss him is maddening. His hand comes up to smooth another loose strand away from her face. He leans in then, but changes the trajectory at the last moment, and plants a soft kiss on her cheek, just a fraction of an inch away from the corner of her lips. For a second Solas looks torn, and a little lost — and the expression, contrasted with the habitual neutral, pleasant mask, or the occasional flashes of cheekiness is heartrendingly sweet. And then something shifts, and his gaze turns purposeful.

“There may be more than one way to even the terrain, fenor,” he says quietly. And with that, he holds the door for them to exit.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by a PSA: do not eat random lichen.

Next up: Songs, and meeting a magister.

# Masters of War

## Chapter Summary

In which Margo repurposes some lyrics, and the team gets an invitation they cannot refuse.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They find the kitchen already staffed, and the cook — a busy, slightly brusque elf, who would be matronly if she weren't so rail-thin — orders them to sit and equips them with bread, cheese, apples, and a pot of tea that Solas eyes with almost as much loathing as de Chevin the night before reserved for the lichen.

“You’re the minstrels, then?” the redhead, who introduces herself as Elandra, shoots over her shoulder. At the sound of the name, Margo stills, the sudden recognition a painful jolt. The mother of Jan’s child was an Elandra, who also was an elven redhead. Margo hopes the Inquisition fulfilled the soldier’s last request — she passed it on to Cassandra when they cremated the victims of the Avvar debacle.

“We are,” Solas confirms, taking a tentative peek into the teapot. He makes a face.

The cook offers a sympathetic head bob. “Bitter, ain’t it? Never liked the stuff myself either. Can get you sweet water if you’d rather.”

After setting a mug of steaming, heavily honeyed liquid that also smells very faintly of lemongrass in front of her guest, Elandra goes off to busy herself with the day’s cooking prep. A child of about seven burst into the kitchen from behind a side door, carrying a crate of vegetables almost as big as her. Margo finds herself staring in uneasy puzzlement. The kid has her mother’s red hair and bright blue eyes, their color and shape an exact replica of Jan’s. But she also looks completely human. Margo wonders how heredity works in case of mixed-race offspring. Are elven phenotypical traits recessive? But recessiveness would imply that elves carry enough human genetic material for the children to present as human. If DNA is indeed how heredity is coded in this universe. She mulls this over. Her embodied experience as Maile gives little evidence for assuming that there aren’t, in fact, radical biochemical difference for how life operates in this world. Isomorphism, after all, doesn’t mean sameness. Based on how quickly phytochemical compounds are processed metabolically, there are definite divergences.

The fact of the matter is, however the heredity lottery plays out, the girl is clearly Jan’s daughter. And there are no comforting words Margo could offer, nothing that wouldn’t just awaken old aches.

A clatter from the other part of the kitchen jolts her out of her thoughts, and Margo quickly refocuses her gaze. She notices that Solas is watching her with a pensive look. Once caught, he quickly tweaks his expression towards the amiably neutral end of the spectrum.

“Do you wish to know what occurred with your errant knight after you lost consciousness?” he asks quietly between sips of his drink. His tone is a little too even. Margo quirks an eyebrow at the

use of the possessive — and his ironic inversion of the correct expression.

“Not *my* knight, but yes. Fill me in.”

“He did attempt to help you. It was lucky I intercepted him before he roused the entire inn. More relevantly for your purposes, he has somehow decided he is honor bound to do your bidding.” Solas looks at her with an unreadable expression. “You put yourself at risk to save a single Tranquil. You also sent de Chevin into the Inquisition’s path. I suspect he will join readily enough, should the offer be made.”

Margo frowns. Either Solas had a detailed conversation with Ser Asshat after she passed out, which is doubtful, or he overheard the end of the original exchange. Which begs the question of how long had he been sneaking about, and to what purpose. Whatever it is, he is clearly not trying to hide the fact. “Regarding Clemence — that’s the Tranquil’s name — I saw no one else volunteer,” she shrugs.

Solas’s expression turns speculative. “That is not quite an answer.”

Margo frowns. What the hell is he fishing for? “I could tell you that I did it because it was the ‘right thing’ to do, but claiming that sort of moral absolute seems silly — I’ve no idea if it was the right thing to do. Clemence might have been safer here, for all I know.”

The elf nods thoughtfully. “Then why, lethallan?”

Margo shrugs. “Clemence tried to be kind, even though he got no personal emotional benefit from it.” She pauses, mulling over the other thoughts. “His way of being in the world is unusual, but that doesn’t mean we should simply abandon him. Especially since we do know something strange *is* happening to the Tranquil.”

Solas observes her with a contemplative expression but doesn’t get a chance to respond.

“Aha, so this is where you are hiding!”

Margo turns her head in the direction of the voice. Dorian, dressed in his more habitual clothes, looms in the door frame. “Is there more tea to be had?” He joins them at the table.

“Have the two of you slept at all?” he asks, with a quirk of an eyebrow.

“Of course.” Solas takes another sip of his drink, and reaches for an apple. “Have you?”

Dorian narrows his eyes at him. “Naturally.”

While the two mages are occupied with attempting to out-smirk each other from underneath their studiously neutral masks, Margo appropriates the last slice of cheese.

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They spend most of the day at the tavern. Bull reiterates his orders, which can be boiled down to “create and sustain a distraction,” but he leaves the specifics to Margo and gives her leave to prepare. She picks a quiet table in the corner of the room away from prying eyes and extracts the Genitivi volume from her bag, along with her journal. There is no time or opportunity to learn new songs. What she can do is adapt her preexisting repertoire. It’s not that different from alchemical work, in the end. Both are a matter of making expedient substitutions while keeping faithful to the principle of the original formula.

Using Dorian's quill and ink to write is laborious, messy work, but after some time, Margo gets the hang of it, and she begins to reshape the familiar lyrics, occasionally leafing through the book to extract events, place names, and historical figures. She counts off the rhythm in her head to see if the new stanzas imitate the original pattern closely enough. She has the chops to change the words — but most certainly not the melody. At one point, Dorian offers his help, but she declines with a smile. Bull and Solas, at another table, appear to be absorbed in a quiet conversation with an unfamiliar mage.

As the sun creeps towards the horizon, its slanted glow painting Margo's table in stripes of gold through the rough privacy slats on the window, the tavern begins to fill up. Neither de Chevin nor Clemence make an appearance. Diane and Brand are also in absentia. Eventually, Bull motions her over to the their table. Margo blows on the ink to set it, gathers her things, and rejoins her companions.

The Qunari passes her his flask. "You ready, Blondie? I'm thinking a few more minutes, and we'll start." Margo nods, but declines the drink. He offers it to Solas — with the edge of a challenge — but the elf declines as well, as does Dorian. Bull shrugs and takes a swig himself. "We're gonna put on a show, but we need to transition roles. Blondie, same course of action for you. I need you to grab their attention, and ruffle some feathers, but make it vague enough that we have plausible deniability. Solas, you're on gathering coin — and checking out the reactions up close. If anyone looks like they're going to draw a knife or throw shit, give me a heads-up, or intercept quietly. Dorian — sit back and look bored. If Alexius or any of his friends show up, you're on bullshit duty. Everyone clear?" They all nod.

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It starts well enough. Margo carries the writ over to Lloyde, who peers at it with a one-eyed squint that really calls for a monocle, then nods and returns the vellum. "Still no whistling, lass. House rules." From there, it's a matter of drawing the crowd's attention. It's not like Margo has any fear of public speaking — her previous career hammered it out of her effectively enough. She bullshits her way through introducing herself through an exceedingly vague royal "we." She thanks the inhabitants of Redcliffe for their hospitality, shooting a smile at Elandra the cook, who is standing by the kitchen doors and wiping her hands on her apron. Then Margo picks a table to sit on, her back to giant barrels of ale. She props her foot on a chair, the viheula in her arms. The pose is as much a performance of slightly saucy casualness as it is strategic. It allows her to set her journal next to her, in case she needs to peek at her rewritten lyrics, or at the chords — and it means she doesn't have anyone at her back. Heads turn in Margo's direction, but most of the expressions are quite dubious.

The tavern door opens to admit a group of newcomers. Every single one of them seems to be a Vint. They look... unpleasant. Dangerous, and a little slimy, like one's stereotypical idea of a disreputable cutthroat — only with better teeth. Margo watches them settle at a large table in the center of the room. They get the barmaid's attention with an impatient snapping of fingers, and the woman scurries to them, a smiling mask plastered over unmistakable fear.

Margo shoots Bull a quick look. He nods and makes a gesture with his hand that mimes something like reeling in a fish. Right. Start with drawing the audience in. She's going to have to find a common denominator. She surveys the crowd. There are roughly as many women as there are men, and by her estimation the Vints are outnumbered by the locals at a ratio of about one to six. There are quite a few locals who do not look magically inclined. What might go over well?

Since nothing creates solidarity across the gender and class divide quite like a story of a drunken cuckolded husband and a clever wife, Margo launches into Seven Drunken Nights. Timeless



universals, and all that.

*As I went home on a Monday night as drunk as drunk could be  
I saw a horse outside the door where my old horse should be*

It takes a few stanzas, but then heads begin to turn — probably because the lyrics are unfamiliar, but also, judging by the expressions, because the local audience wasn't really expecting a humorous register. Margo continues with the song, while trying to read the reactions. Most morph to cautiously amused quickly enough.

As the song's apocryphal wife claims her lover's horse is a milk cow, his hat is a chamber pot, and his pipe is a tin whistle — to the gullible husband's doubtful but ultimately accepting head-scratching — the audience gradually warms to Margo. When she gets to Thursday night, when the husband finds the conspicuous boots sticking out from under his wife's bed, not only is Margo getting a few feet to stomp along, but there are grins here and there, especially from the locals who aren't mages — she supposes marital problems are closer to home for them. Since the last two verses of the original song were considered entirely too lewd to sing publicly, Margo uses one of the sanitized versions. By the time she reaches the Sunday verse, in which the hapless husband returns from his drunken binge in the wee hours to a fellow running out of his wife's house with his pants still down, loud guffaws and knee-slaps ensue. She voices the wife with exaggeratedly impatient shrewdness.

*Oh, you're drunk, you're drunk, you silly old fool, and still you cannot see  
Twas nothing but the tax collector the Empress sent to me*

Appreciative chuckles drift from a table of female mages to her right. She grins back, and plays up the rasp of her contralto to emphasize the drunken cluelessness of the song's narrator.

*Well, it's many a night I've travelled, a hundred miles or more  
But an Orlesian that could last all night I never saw before*

The room booms with laughter, as Margo's variant flips the raunchy humor into a nationalist slur. Her substitution works well enough — the Ferelden part of the assembled audience is more than happy to have a good laugh at Orlais's expense. The Vints smile thinly.

Margo spots Solas gliding around the room. As he passes the patrons, he turns his absurd hat over with a theatrical flourish, and Margo can hear coins clink into its depths. The cluster of Vints doesn't tip. If anything can confirm them as evil, it is that.

She throws a glance at Bull's table. There has been some castling on the metaphorical chessboard. Dorian is now occupying what used to be Bull's seat — the one with the bear pelt as a backdrop. He is sprawled in his chair with an expression of jaded indifference and a glass of wine that he twirls idly in his fingers. Bull, next to him, has adopted the relaxed-but-alert pose that Margo associates with professional goons, thugs, and shady businessmen's personal bodyguards.

Solas, bless him, walks up to her table and hands her a mug of honeyd tea. Margo mouths a thank you. He stops, his back to the room, and positions himself such that he partially shields her from the audience. Margo smiles into the cup. The elf does have rather nice shoulders for someone with an otherwise narrow frame. Which, of course, is probably not the appropriate thought to have at the moment, but coping mechanisms, and all that. He leans in, his lips close to her ear.

“Strive to irritate Redcliffe's new masters, but be cautious. The mercenary on the right has throwing knives. I can discretely tamper with a hostile spell. Less so a blade.” He resumes his rounds.

Margo sets the tea down, and picks up the vihuela. There are some hoots from the audience, and demands for another song. She hesitates. She needs something that simultaneously cuts through the mages' dejection and grates on the Vints, but with enough wiggle room where, if confronted, she could say it wasn't about them at all. Right. Plausible deniability. She's got the perfect candidate.

*One morning when I woke up  
Oh fare thee well, fare thee well, fare thee well, well, well  
One morning when I woke up  
I found the slavers at my door*

There is a reason, of course, that the original song has been used by leftist revolutionary movements and every other rebel group since its origins with Italian anti-fascist partisans during World War II. The tune is ridiculously, stupidly catchy. And the rhythm of the lyrics is easy to tweak. It did not take Margo long to adapt the song to the politics of Thedas, with a little help from her nice new friend Brother Genitivi. She replaces partisans with rebel mages but keeps the enemy vague, invoking the shadow of slavery instead of pointing the finger more predictably at the Templars. The theme is the same, however. And, in the end, she supposes it's always the same — about someone willing to put their life on the line and die for a cause, because the alternative is unlivable.

*Next time you see me, I will be smiling  
Oh fare thee well, fare thee well, fare thee well, well, well  
I'll be in prison, or on the gallows  
Because our freedom's not for sale*

She doesn't look around as she sings — instead, she lets her eyes drift out of focus and delivers the lyrics with an amused smirk. The room with each stanza falls into deeper silence. By the last verse, when the would-be rebel makes the final request to his comrades — a verse Margo transformed specifically with a mage audience in mind — the quiet is downright eerie.

*When I die fighting against oppression  
Oh fare thee well, fare thee well, fare thee well, well, well  
Carry my body up to the mountain  
And guide my soul across the Veil*

She finishes, her heart hammering at breakneck speed. There is a long, uncomfortable pause. And then, from the table where the group of female mages sits — two of them, Margo notices, are elves — she hears a loud, "You sing true, sister!" Then, as if this gives the assembled patrons permission, there are quite a few loud cheers and pounding of fists on tables. But there are also insults hurled. The audience fractures into interpretive camps, and there are as many "Void take the Templars and their Chantry" as there are "'D'ya hear the bit about not selling out our freedom? It's about elves, you numpty" — not to mention a couple of more predictably crude statements about the shape of one's ears and the shape of one's ass addressed to Margo directly — and it's all met with counter-insults until the room progressively fills with the roar of animated chatter. Margo looks up to see the contingent of Vints observing her with the cold, lifeless eyes of people long since comfortable with murder, or worse. One of the cutthroats gets up, walks briskly to the door, and exits the tavern.

Margo looks around. Solas, who has stopped gathering tips and has found a somewhat unobtrusive stretch of wall to lean against, is watching her with an odd expression. Bull and Dorian are still performing their nobleman-and-his-bodyguard still life. The Qunari gives her a tiny little nod when she catches his gaze and makes a gesture of closing his fist, which Margo interprets as him ordering her to take a break. Since the catgut strings have a tendency to loosen rather quickly, Margo

occupies herself with retuning the vihuela.

Task completed, Margo decides — in retrospect, with completely irrational optimism — that perhaps she has the time to buy herself a mug of ale and a bite to eat before she has to resume her political agitating. She is making her way towards the bar when the tavern door is flung open and in strolls an older fellow in a ridiculous sort of hood — from where Margo is standing, she could swear it has little ears — with a retinue of completely terrified mages alongside perfectly self-assured ruffian-for-hire types. The Vint who had left earlier brings up the rear. The din in the tavern fizzles out. The fellow with the ear-shaped protrusions on his hood surveys the assembled crowd with unmistakable distaste, until his eyes fall on Dorian. And then his face breaks into a smile, and he makes his way to the table by the bear pelt. Margo catches Solas's gaze. The elf's jaw tightens — which confirms Margo's suspicion that the hooded man is the much-feared magister.

The new arrival settles across from Dorian, and the waitress rushes past Margo with an expression that looks both hateful and eager to please.

Margo decides to make herself scarce until explicitly called upon, but her vague hopes for dinner have been dispelled as quickly as they materialize. She catches Dorian gesturing her over with a lazy wave. Great.

She walks over slowly, trying to buy herself some time to assess the infamous Magister Alexius. His skin is timeworn and a little pockmarked, but he has the sort of face that looks like it was no stranger to laughter at one point, but then the laugh lines fell into disuse. He casts her a perfunctory glance, then turns back to Dorian.

Margo stops a few feet away. Since she's not sure what the script for this particular performance is, she decides to play it safe and adopts the self-effacing demeanor of almost every other city elf she has come across. Dorian, after a brief pause, motions her to take a seat next to him, and so Margo walks over, lowers herself into the chair, and places the vihuela flat on her lap.

"I see you have managed to avail yourself of some basic comforts of civilization, Dorian. I must admit, I was surprised when I heard you had returned." Alexius picks up the goblet of wine the waitress deposited in front of him and drains half of it in a single gulp. Margo notes that there is a slight tremor to his fingers. This close, she can also see the heavy bags under the man's eyes. She wonders what might be ailing the magister — perhaps the task of keeping the local mages under his boot is proving harrowing.

"We had our disagreements, Gereon. I will not lie that I have resolved them for myself. But I have come to believe your work here is foundational for our understanding of magical theory. Not to mention that your presence has political implications for our homeland. Neither factor can I easily walk away from, as I am sure you realize."

Alexius drains the rest of his wine. "Yes. You were wise to procure a bodyguard. I find the situation here in the south is intolerably volatile. Keeping this pitiful backwater from imploding has taken entirely too much of my attention." He drums his fingers on the table irritably. "Be that as it may, I am pleased that you have returned — you will, of course, come stay with me at the keep. There is little time to lose. I am so close to a breakthrough, and your help will be indispensable. Now, where is that incompetent serving girl? She was meant to come back with the bottle."

Margo steals a covert glance at Dorian. If the mage is unnerved by this announcement — or by the Magister's apparently robust drinking habit — he lets none of it show. Bull's expression remains stoically indifferent as well.

“Gereon, I certainly appreciate the offer of hospitality, but I assure you, we are perfectly comfortable...”

Alexius waves this away with an impatient gesture. “Nonsense. This pitiful excuse for an inn is beneath you. The only reason I am here is that I had business in the village and heard that you’d returned and were entertaining yourself by causing some kind of unrest via your minstrel. And since I was in the vicinity...”

At this, Alexius casts another — this time unpleasantly curious — glance at Margo.

“Tell me, girl. What did your master have you sing to get this sorry lot to do more than bleat dim-wittedly? It is all I have seen them capable of. Surely my former pupil would not attempt to undermine me in some circuitous way? Not if he understood why my work is so crucial.”

Margo swallows. There is something profoundly *off* about the Magister’s tone — a kind of underlying wobble she can’t quite put her finger on. Not to mention that the statement smacks of paranoia — even if, in this case, Alexius is not that far off the mark. She opens her mouth to speak, but before she can attempt to bullshit her way through it, Dorian interjects.

“Undermine you, Gereon? With crude ditties about unfaithful wives and some simplistic little tune meant to remind the local mages of their lot under the southern Chantry? Do not be ridiculous. But the girl does have some talent — I would not have kept her otherwise. I can have her sing something for you, if you wish. To pass the time.”

Margo wants to glare Dorian into oblivion, but before she can test whether incinerating people with her gaze might have been one of Maile’s hidden talents, Solas appears, carrying a bottle of wine. He turns to Dorian. “The barkeep requested that I bring this up for you — *master*. The waitress is indisposed.”

Dorian nods, and Solas places the bottle on the table. Alexius reaches for it immediately and pours himself a glass, then offers to top off Dorian’s. Solas retreats to the back wall. Margo notes that the elf’s jaw is set in a way that highlights the sharpness of his features, which his patently amiable expression usually smooths over. He is practically crackling with repressed fury.

Margo’s attention is drawn by a movement from Bull. He brings his fist to his chest and taps it over his heart a few times. To an outside observer, it might look like he’s dealing with heartburn. She doubts it’s anything so pedestrian. More likely Bull is conveying one of his unspoken messages. Right. Pick something that might have emotional resonance for the magister — something that might get to him, in other words.

“I would be happy to sing for you,” Margo says quietly, forcing her expression into an approximation of demureness.

“Sing, then,” Alexius acquiesces. “But have a care that you do not bore. Do not waste my time with primitive limericks designed to amuse peasants. I do not suffer idiocy lightly.”

*Fuck you*, Margo thinks. *Let’s see how you like this one.* She had to modify the song quite heavily to scrub the details that anchored it to her own world. But the chords are simple enough, and her voice lends the melody a different kind of edge — less youthful defiance, more fatalistic fury. More importantly, the original message captures *something* of what she sees in the mood of the assembled mages and, strangely enough, in Alexius himself — a kind of desperate, brittle nihilism brought on by the awareness that the end is already here.

*Come you masters of war*

*You whose armies have come  
You that weave the death spells  
You that wield all the bombs  
You that hide behind walls  
You that hide behind desks  
I just want you to know I can see through your masks*

Margo's adapted lyrics are full of substitutions, but they blend local flavor into the song's original formula. Yet, the meaning of the anti-Vietnam war anthem shifts subtly — even though its barbs mostly hit the same marks. She guesses that the image of young people dying brutal deaths in some mindless, faceless war is something that everyone in the room understands all too well. She keeps the enemy vague enough: for an audience of mostly Fereldans and Free Marchers, that the nemesis might be Tevinters with their magic or Qunari with their gaatlok or Orlesians with their Game is fortuitous. Some substitutions took finagling. She switches the invocation of Judas for a reference to the Old Gods — whatever they are. And, since she is not sure whether the social organization of Thedas is capitalist in the strict sense of the term, she replaces money with power — since the two are not necessarily equivalent in her new context. But most are easy: arrows for bullets, swords for guns.

*You aim the quick arrows  
For others to fire  
And you sit back and watch  
As the death count gets higher  
You hide in your fortress  
As the young people's blood  
Flows out of their bodies  
And is buried in the mud*

She doesn't look up until the stanza where the song levies what to Margo has always felt like its pivotal indictment. And then she fixes her gaze on Alexius. This one, she didn't have to modify at all.

*You've thrown the worst fear  
That can ever be hurled  
Fear to bring children  
Into this world  
And for threatening my baby  
Unborn and unnamed  
You ain't worth the blood that runs in your veins*

As she hears herself sing the words, Margo realizes that her delivery is turning for the eerily venomous — either as a result of her own barely acknowledged anxiety over the possibility of her body's pregnancy, or because it is yet another reminder of her daughter and the life she never got to live.

From there, hardly any substitutions are needed — the rest maps well enough. She replaces Jesus with Andraste, disregarding the slight hitch in the rhythm.

There is one, terrifying moment where Margo gets precipitously close to fucking up. When she sings her slightly tweaked version of the verse where the narrator denies its hypothetical interlocutor any chance at redemption — *"I think you will find, when the death takes its toll, all the power you gathered will never earn back your soul"* — she looks up, and catches sight of Solas, who is still leaning against the back wall. She almost fumbles. The elf has turned as pale as a

shroud, his eyes dark and sharp and fixed on her like he has seen an apparition. She looks away quickly, lest his strange reaction distract her and she blurt something that'll give her away.

By the time Margo gets to the final stanza, you could hear a pin drop. Alexius is staring at her with creepy focus — the derisive boredom wiped from his features.

She prudently fixes her gaze on the floorboards. The last verse is the one she modified the most, to account for the funeral traditions she's seen in Thedas so far. And also to give it a bit more of a bite.

*And I hope that you die  
And your death will come soon  
By the blaze of your pyre  
On a late afternoon  
I will watch as you crumble  
Into your deathbed  
Then I'll spit on your ashes  
And cheer that you're dead*

There is a long silence. Margo ventures a look. Her three companions are staring at her with an assortment of muffled expressions. Dorian's is a mixture of surprise and alarm, Bull's is, for lack of a better word, one of bloodthirsty solidarity, and Solas's is... Margo has no idea.

In the silence, Alexius's slow clap is deafening.

"I will grant you this, Dorian. Your little bird has pluck. An entertaining feature in this spineless morass of a town." The magister gets up, polishes off the rest of his wine, and flicks his hand over at his retinue, scattered around a nearby table. Then he returns his gaze to Dorian. "Come, my friend. Gather your things." The gesture that accompanies the order encompasses Margo, Bull, and Solas in addition to their bags. "Enough of these rustic clods. Let us return to the castle."

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by three different songs. Seven Drunken Nights and Masters of War are fairly famous in popular culture in general, so probably need little introduction. The song in the middle is a translation/modified version of Bella Ciao.

Next up: Redcliffe castle, time travel shenanigans (sort of), and general unpleasantness.

# Sympathy for the Devil

## Chapter Summary

Redcliffe castle and all manner of unpleasantness.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The castle is in disrepair. Not just because the keep itself is old — although that is certainly the case, the very walls covered in the woven histories of their previous occupants. But it's more than that. There is something *unkempt* about the hallways, as if whoever inhabits the space now is no longer concerned with maintaining appearances. The strange, dreamlike quality she noticed in the cloud of time-slowness fairy dust in the village is stronger here, but also more diffuse, and Margo keeps blinking to try to get her eyes to focus properly.

They are led through a maze of little passages into a hall that she guesses serves as Alexius's dining room. A large table stands in the center, covered in a tablecloth stained with the ghosts of repasts past. An assortment of dishes in various states of edibility litter its surface, as if no one is cleaning the previous meal's leftovers before bringing in the next one.

"Come, come. Sit." Alexius gestures for Dorian to take the chair at the head of the table, to the right of a throne-like construction that presumably hosts the illustrious ass of whomever the current head of household might be. Dorian walks over confidently and plops down in a relaxed if slightly bored pose, by all appearances perfectly at ease in these surroundings. Bull, silent and stone-faced, his gaze focused straight ahead, comes to stand behind the back of Dorian's chair, thumbs hooked into his belt. Margo and Solas stop simultaneously at a respectful distance, waiting for further instructions.

"Good, good! Make yourself at home, Dorian. Are you hungry? Have your servant bring us some sustenance. The help here is too terrified to be of much use these days." Alexius rubs his face with a pale, bony hand. "I shouldn't have used some of them to power the first spells, I suppose, but what is done is done."

"Solas," Dorian gestures with a flick of his fingers. "Be a good man. Go fetch us something from the kitchens, would you? Which way, Gereon?"

The magister gestures through a doorway. "Through there and down the stairs. He cannot miss it."

"Of course, *master*."

Margo stands still, eyes downcast, not daring to look at the elf's retreating frame. She doesn't have to look to guess what might be going through his mind — she catches a faint whiff of ozone, as if his magic crackles, barely contained, beneath the subservient mask. Margo hopes Alexius is too preoccupied to notice.

"Watch out for that one. Terribly hard to train if they're not born into it. You. Little bird. Come closer, now, I don't bite."

Margo's legs carry her forward, and she comes to stand at the left of Dorian's chair. Alexius examines her, his lips twisted in a slightly derisive smirk.

"She is entirely too fractious to make a proper servant, you know. Where did you procure her?" This close, Alexius reminds Margo of a lizard. One of those poisonous ones that will bite you, and then follow you around until you croak, so that they can scarf you up without too much resistance.

Dorian yawns lazily into his fist, picks up a goblet of wine, and sniffs its contents. He sets it back down. "Oh, from the usual swamp — you know how the south is. She's got a pleasant enough voice, and she does what she's told, by and large."

Alexius laughs, the sound mirthless. "You've changed, my friend. Your father would be proud."

Dorian's face doesn't alter — and, with a quick glance at the mage, Margo decides that this effort at indifference costs him. "I suppose we all need to grow up at some point." His tone is pitched to a careful neutral.

Solas materializes in the doorway with a tray of bread and cheese, a bottle of wine, and two goblets. Alexius pays absolutely no attention as the elf sets the food and drink on the table and retreats against a nearby column, behind Dorian and Bull. He might as well be a piece of moving tapestry — although, come to think of it, a moving tapestry might garner more interest.

"Indeed, we do." Margo can feel the magister's gaze land on her once again — he looks like he is assessing a horse or a hound. He points a finger at the chair opposite Dorian. "Sit, girl."

He returns his attention to Dorian. "My experiments will be much facilitated now that you are back, my friend. With you at my side, I can finally run the simulations — no more of this blind blundering in the dark. I would, in fact, like to undertake one shortly, with your assistance. There is little time to waste."

Dorian cuts himself a slice of cheese, fills the two goblets with wine, and hands one to his former mentor. Alexius drains his glass in a single gulp, then reaches for the bottle and pours himself more, filling the goblet to the brim. He drains that as well but doesn't touch the food. Margo estimates that this is at least four large glasses of wine consumed in about an hour.

"Certainly. You will have to explain to me how far your studies have progressed, but I would, of course, happily assist. Your work has always been fascinating." Dorian pauses, and looks around. "How is Felix?"

Margo watches surreptitiously as the magister's lined face grows grim and, for the briefest of moments, deep heartbreak flashes in his eyes — an expression that makes him look bizarrely, uncomfortably vulnerable.

"Worse. But I am so close. I know I am. If I can only..." Suddenly, his face turns to Margo. "Tell me, girl. Have you any children? You little gutter rats tend to breed young." He turns to Dorian, apparently set on explaining his sudden conversation with the domestic fauna. "I find that women often have more understanding of what it is like. Even in the slums, you will find genuine sentiment when children are concerned. It elevates them slightly above the morass of their baser being."

Dorian retains his slightly bored expression. He shrugs noncommittally. The older man's attention returns to Margo. "Well? Have you?"



Margo levels what she hopes is a calm stare at the magister. “Yes, my lord. I had a daughter. She died of an incurable illness when she was young.”

A ringing silence descends over them for a few moments. Margo can feel the others’ attention shift to her, but she doesn’t break eye contact. She stares into Alexius’s brown irises and *wills* him to recall himself under the crust of nihilistic disenchantment. If everything he is doing is on behalf of his child, maybe there is still a man who can be reached. Ivan hadn’t spiraled out of control until after their daughter’s death — until then, he had clung to hope, just like she had. Maybe like this man does, and for that, she cannot fault him.

“Perhaps that is what I heard in your song at the tavern, then.” Alexius leans in. His breath smells of sour wine and an unhealthy sort of odor that puts Margo in mind of burning plastic. She associates the smell with lyrium. “Yes. I can see it in you. An old wound that will never stop oozing, right... over... here.” He jams his finger into her chest, over her heart. His dirty fingernail leaves a pale indentation in the exposed skin over the collar of her tunic. The touch makes Margo’s skin crawl. The magister’s expression veers towards the reptilian again. “You know Dorian, I like that desolation in her eyes. Very... stirring. It reminds me that Felix is still among us, and this means there is time for us yet. Time to fix it. I wonder if you would consider lending your little bird to me for a time?”

Margo grits her teeth. What was she thinking? It’s not her job to try to reach this man, to dull his broken edges, no matter that she recognizes that grief in his eyes, and he in hers, however ugly the words he clothes the sentiment in might be. If she were a better woman, perhaps she could attempt to break through. Work on him, leverage this to their advantage. But she isn’t a better woman. The magister can go fuck a log. No one was there to save Ivan from himself. She sure as hell hadn’t been enough. And no one was there to save her either. Only Baba and Jake, in bottomless, heartbroken sorrow. The world is all that is the case.

Right. The problem with trying to have sympathy for the devil is that the devil is still a monumental asshat, only also whingy. She owes this piece of shit no succor.

Whatever Alexius sees in her eyes, he doesn’t like it. His face hardens.

“So.” Dorian’s tone is just a little clipped. “What are you working on? Shall we commence right away? You spoke of simulation — is it related to our work on time and continuity?”

Dorian’s intervention distracts Alexius from his rather hostile leering — Margo has the distinct impression the magister is trying to drown out his demons in whatever vice is most expediently available at any given moment, and that opportunism makes him unpredictable and dangerous. Alexius claps his hands once. “Quite right. Yes. No time like the present. Should we relocate to my office? No, no, we will do this right here. It is a simple simulation after all — it should allow me to have a quick peek into the past, test a few more variables without having to complete the spell fully.”

Before Dorian can protest, Alexius extracts something from beneath his leather vest, and Margo notes that the collar of his shirt, likely a crisp white at one point, is stained with yellowish gray.

The magister’s hand reveals an amulet. It looks to Margo like a cube of malachite. Alexius’s eyes sparkle to life when he stares at the stone.

“Yes. We will do this now. I have an excellent feeling about this one.”

“Gereon, wait. We should perhaps send the rest of them out of range, don’t you think?”

The magister waves his hand. “It’s only a simulation, Dorian. An illusion. They should not be affected. This is trifling compared to what this little wonder can do. All I need is for you to use a nullification enchantment when the static charge builds up around the amulet and redirect some of the energy into the ambient aura — don’t forget to project it *behind* the barrier spell — until the field is stable. Here, have your bodyguard take a step back.” The magister pours himself another glass of wine and gulps it down. Margo fidgets nervously. That’s number five. Is being sloshed a contraindication for performing magic?

“What about her?” A muscle in the side of Dorian’s cheek is twitching involuntarily. Shit. Whatever Alexius thinks he is about to do is clearly not receiving Dorian’s seal of approval as far as safety is concerned.

“Who? Oh, yes. I had forgotten.” Alexius leans forward, looking especially reptilian as he does. His fingers curl around Margo’s wrist. “Would you like to see something truly unique, girl?” Margo forces herself not to shudder in revulsion. “This, my dear, is the sort of magic that one might behold once in a generation. It took your master and me many years to develop the prototype.”

“Gereon, I do not believe...”

“Hush, my pupil. Now be a good sport, and follow my lead.”

And then, the magister begins to weave his spell. The feeling of unreality ratchets up, until Margo is fairly certain that the entire experience is just the fading memory of a nightmare. The table and walls stretch and wobble, as if pulled through an invisible funnel. And the last thing she hears before being sucked into the distortion vortex is Alexius’s irritated exclamation: “*No, no, the other way!*”

And then the world crumbles.

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Margo comes to on the stone floor of a cell, the space illuminated faintly by a reddish glow. She turns her head slowly, trying to determine where she is. It looks like a dungeon. None of it feels real — although it doesn’t feel like the Fade, either. And then the whole unpleasantness with Alexius comes crashing back, and she clambers to her feet. She is alone. Judging by the presence of rusty metal bars, she is locked in, but when she moves to rattle her cage — because that seems like the time-honored if clichéd strategy — she notices that the door is, in fact, ajar.

The source of the reddish glow turns out to be a giant crimson crystal, except that it doesn’t behave like a mineral should. For one, it pulsates — which no self-respecting crystalline structure ought to be doing. And second, it is exceptionally noisy. Like a shortwave radio, except if the antenna were in fact implanted inside Margo’s own skull. And the music selection could use some improvement: it sounds to her like the acoustic love child of nails on a chalkboard and the world’s most annoying wind chime. She steps away from the nasty thing and bumps into Dorian.

“Ah! Are you all right? It would seem that Alexius’s spell has gone awry, does it not?”

“Has anyone told you that you have a knack for euphemisms?”

Dorian smiles, but his expression is uneasy, his eyes scanning their surroundings with increasing confusion. “This, whatever it is, does not appear to be quite real. A simulation, indeed, but of what?”

“I suppose we should go find out,” Margo retorts, with bravado she doesn’t feel at all.

They don’t make it very far before they encounter a guard. He pays them zero attention. They might as well be invisible. Dorian passes his hand in front of the man’s helmet.

Suddenly, the guard collapses, a spray of red droplets swirling around him in a bloody mist.

“Did you do that?” Margo hisses.

“No!” Dorian frowns. “He is being used to power blood magic — not by me, mind you — but...”

“What in the Void is happening?” Margo steps away from the convulsing body on the ground. If the guard’s unexplainable demise is coincidental... Is this prerecorded? “Dorian, could this be a memory?”

The mage looks around once again, his gaze growing distant for a few moments, before his brow creases in a frown.

“Yes, something like a memory, but not exactly. Some sort of construct, perhaps? Although, to be perfectly honest, this feels to me like a... possibility.”

Margo nods. “A model?”

“Not quite. For a simulation, its structure is too uneven, for lack of a better term. Let us see if we can find some answers.”

Slowly, they move through the castle. More of the garrison members get utilized to power the blood magic cast by some invisible force. Dorian and Margo don’t stay to watch, leaving the gruesome ballet to play itself out on its own. They quickly discover that they cannot interact with any of the objects. At one point, Margo reaches for a book on a crooked, partially broken shelf. It feels like her fingers grasp the spine for a second, but then the tome is back to where it was, and the only thing she’s grasping is air.

“Curious,” Dorian comments.

If the castle was in disrepair before, it is an utter mess now. That strange red crystal grows from walls in huge, amorphous masses, like some kind of mineral tumor, and Margo winces at its dissonant humming whenever they pass a particularly large growth. It is the only thing that feels real in the place.

“Do not fondle the strange mineral,” Dorian warns, his voice simultaneously sarcastic and alarmed, when Margo reaches a tentative finger towards one of the glowing shards. “We have no idea what this does.”

“All right,” Margo nods. “No fondling.”

“No fondling,” Dorian confirms, a little distractedly, and Margo shudders against the creeping panic icing down her spine, because if Dorian can’t focus on his own joke, then they are well and truly fucked.

By the time they make it to what turns out to be the first dungeon, Margo’s teeth are chattering. In part because it is absolutely freezing — clearly, no one is bothering with heating the place. The cold, at least, feels real enough. And in part because as they make their way down the stone staircase she recognizes the voice of the man who is singing below.

“Three hundred bottles of beer on the wall. Three hundred bottles of beer. Take one down, pass it around. Ugh.”

They hurry down the steps.

The first thing she notices is the red glow in the Qunari’s eye and the crimson tendrils that waft around his head.

Bull startles and stares at Dorian, then at her.

“You’re not dead,” he states accusatorially. “You’re supposed to be dead. I saw them dump your corpse over the ramparts myself.” His voice doubles with a strange echo. He turns to Dorian. “And last time I heard, you were in Tevinter, taking your rightful seat in the Magisterium.”

“What?” Dorian looks horrified.

“Dead?” Margo asks simultaneously. “Are we... What is this?”

“Bull, *when* are we?” Dorian’s expression is stricken.

The Qunari shrugs. “What do you mean, ‘when’? We’re after everything went to shit. If you want more specific dates... My guess? About a year since the Boss went to Redcliffe. They don’t give us a calendar, mind you, so I’m a bit fuzzy.”

Margo frowns. Redcliffe? Hadn’t Evie gone to the Templars? Unless this is a simulation of the alternative choice?

“Dorian,” Margo swallows. “Why is he interacting with us? Why is he real?”

Dorian shakes his head. “I do not know that he is. Although that red glow...”

“You know I can hear you, right? Yeah, I’m at least as real as you, Vint. And that glowing shit you’re seeing is red lyrium. If I’m lucky, it’ll kill me. If not, I just hope I die fighting.”

“Can we get him out of that cage?” Margo asks. Before Dorian can respond, she tries to pull on the bars, but it’s no use. They are, for all intents and purposes, phantoms. Her fingers go right through the metal.

“Wait. What about him?” Dorian turns to Bull. “Is it possible for us to interact physically?”

A trace of humor creeps into Bull’s lyrium-stained eye. “Never used to be a problem, as far as you and I were concerned. ‘Interacted’ plenty, especially after all the shit started collapsing around our ears. It was a good two months, all things considered.” Margo watches understanding dawn in Dorian’s eyes. The shock on his features would be comical, if it weren’t for Bull’s expression. The Qunari’s face is completely unguarded, and utterly bereft. “Ah. What are you, from some kind of past? I’d say the whole phantom thing gives it away, but that look on your face... Hasn’t really happened for you yet, huh. Guess it might never. Well, we made the best of it. Should’ve told me that you Vints had reeducators, though. I would’ve at least tried to pull you out.”

Whatever this cryptic message means, Dorian clearly understands it, because he blanches. “Oh. So that is how they got me into the Magisterium.” His tone is bone-dry. “My father finally got his way, it appears.”

“Dorian,” Margo calls softly. “Can your magic help break him out?”

The mage collects himself with a visible effort. “It is certainly worth the attempt. Bull, I will throw an augmentation spell on you — strive to break the lock, will you?”

“Hell yeah. Worth a shot.”

It’s over in less than ten seconds. A flare of silver surrounds the Qunari, and with a strong kick he dislodges the rusty metal door.

“Ah... That felt *good* . Almost like old times. Let’s get out of here.” Bull walks out of the cage, his shoulder brushing against Dorian’s robe. Margo can hear the rustle of fabric. Dorian’s eyes widen. “See, told you. I’m real. If we can, let’s see if Solas is still alive. I lost track of him months ago.”

They follow the Qunari up the stairs.

“Bull, what happened with Alexius?”

“Don’t fret about Alexius, Blondie. It’s his Elder One you need to be worried about. He assassinated the empress of Orlais, used the confusion to invade the south. With an army of demons. Have you ever fought a demon army? I don’t recommend it. In fact, I’m guessing they’re headed this way. That’s why there are so few guards around — Alexius has used them all for blood magic. Not sure what he’s trying to do. My guess is that he’s not looking forward to his boss being back, either.”

Elder One? Whatever that is, it bodes poorly.

“Why hasn’t he used you?” Margo winces. “Sorry.”

Bull shrugs. “I guess that red shit he made us eat fucks with his spells.”

By the time they get to the second dungeon, Margo has almost managed to convince herself that all of this is some utterly horrid hallucination, and that the best thing to do is to take it with a grain of salt. Or a sprinkle. Or perhaps a couple of pounds — no such thing as too much salt, right?

And then another cluster of cells looms down a staircase.

“Is someone there?”

Oh, merciful universe, no. The ground drops from under her, and Margo has to grab onto Dorian’s arm for stability. The mage rights her and nods briefly.

“Yeah, that’s how I felt, too, when I heard you two stroll in,” Bull comments, with a quick glance at her.

They walk down. It’s all she can do not to run. It’s an illusion, she reminds herself. A model. Nothing but a model. There, on the right, a movement. She recognizes the damn sweater.

When the elf turns around from his pacing, Margo practically staggers under the impact — even though, of course, she isn’t surprised at all to see that his eyes, too, are backlit with crimson. Solas’s gaze focuses on her, and for a brief moment his expression is full of desperate hope, until it morphs to disbelief, and then into angry denial.

“You are alive? No.” He shakes his head. “No, it cannot be.”

“Solas, this may seem strange, but this is a spell. We are caught in Alexius’s time modeling.”

Dorian exhales. “Although I believe his casting was destabilized, so it would appear that the spell is modeling the future, not the past as I had expected.”

Solas’s gaze flicks to Dorian, then returns to Margo. He walks over to the front of the cage, long elegant fingers curling around the metal bars. “A model? Has this world not yet come to pass?”

“In a sense. In fact, I am reasonably sure that it *cannot* come to pass considering its main precondition will not be met.” Dorian sounds pleased with himself, but his expression remains uneasy.

“Bull, can you get him out?” Margo’s voice comes out *almost* steady.

“Sure thing, Blondie. Dorian? A little help?”

Their previous maneuver is successful once again.

Solas staggers out of the cell but then straightens slowly. A slouch remains — he carries himself like a man weighed down by time, as if twenty years have passed and not just one. “It is difficult to conceive of this as a mere model. It is real to me. I am... aware of myself, and capable of thought.” He looks at Margo again. “This... No. A model could not replicate...” His face crumbles into pure anguish before he rearranges the pieces into a passable mask. The gesture he begins is aborted midway, and his hands drop to his sides.

“Yeah, that’s what I told them, but they insist they’re the only real ones around here. Meanwhile, who can bust up the furniture, hmm?” Bull shakes his head and kicks at the bars of the cage.

Margo casts a quick look at Dorian, but his expression is slightly lost. She turns to Solas, trying to slow down her madly beating heart. “Solas. In your reality, what happened?”

The elf takes a deep breath. There is an unpleasant rattle to the sound of it. “The Herald chose to confront Alexius and rescue the Redcliffe mages. She was captured, along with those who accompanied her. Cassandra, Vivienne, and Blackwall are dead.” Solas’s lips press into a grim line, but he forces himself to continue, his tone almost clinical. “Without the Herald and Cassandra, the Inquisition disintegrated. Bull, Leliana, you, and I attempted to sneak into the castle and find the Herald. I...” He shakes his head. “We knew she was alive.”

Margo digs her nails into her hands, wishing desperately to wake up. It does her no good.

“Bull has informed you of the Elder One and his demon army?”

“Yes.”

“They are near,” he says simply.

“What will happen when they arrive?” Their eyes meet. Solas’s irises are almost completely swallowed by the red shimmer.

“At a guess? They will raze this place to the ground.”

On impulse, she reaches for his hand. His fingers are material — still cool against hers, but with a deep, almost imperceptible tremor. “Oh, ma’nas,” he whispers, and Margo lets out a choked sob. There is no way in hell this is just a model. A model wouldn’t call her this. She takes his other hand, and he twines his fingers through hers.

“Ahem. Margo — you two take a few moments to talk. I do have some questions I would like to

ask Bull, and it would seem you have your own discussion pending, yes?” Dorian’s tone is tense.

“You just want one more ride for the road, Vint. I know you.”

Dorian mutters a profanity under his breath, but the two walk up the stairs and out of earshot.

Margo turns to Solas, and she almost doesn’t wince when his gaze finds hers again. “Can this be fixed? Solas, I can’t just let you...”

He shakes his head. “No, vhenan. It cannot be fixed. I am dying. This world is... a terrible mistake. An abomination. If you are able, you must obviate it at all costs.” He lets out a slow breath. “But you have already given me hope by suggesting that this is nothing but an unrealized possibility, no matter what my own experience tells me. Now you must take the knowledge that it offers and deploy it against the chance that this reality may come to pass.”

She squeezes his fingers more tightly. “Tell me what you have learned. What became of Evie?”

His expression is grim. “Alexius completed the Rite of Tranquility. It left the Herald much more damaged than an ordinary Tranquil. Although I suspect this was intentional. She is able to perform some basic bodily functions without assistance. But she is not much more than a shell that hosts the mark’s magic.” He disentangles his hands from Margo’s grasp and cups her face, fingers trembling slightly against her skin. “Ir abelas. I am so sorry. I know you cared... care for her.”

Margo feels the tears trail down her cheeks, but it is the least of her worries. “What else? Haven? The others?”

He shakes his head, his gaze bereft. “Varric? Sera? Please, Solas. Tell me some of them made it out.”

His thumbs trace her cheekbones, his touch soft. “It is possible. Both Sera and Varric vanished shortly after we were captured. I have no news besides. I believe Josephine and Cullen may yet live.”

“And Torq—... Leliana?”

Another negative headshake. “I’m sorry, ma’ nas. She was captured with us.” The doubling of his voice sets Margo’s teeth on edge. His hands trail down to her neck, then along her shoulders. Finally, as if leaping off some internal and invisible edge, he encircles her waist and pulls her against him. This close, she can *hear* the lyrium hum. “Oh, vhenan, to touch you again... I didn’t think...” He trails off, and Margo watches his throat work as he swallows.

“I take it that you and I became lovers in the end.” Margo ventures a tentative smile, because she can’t stand that tortured look. “At least this shitty version did one thing right.”

That gets her a surprised, slightly breathless chuckle. “Yes. We did. Too briefly in retrospect, although the blame is mine.” His smile is impossibly tender. Even in their most intimate moments, the version of Solas she is familiar with never looked at her this way. “If you happen to meet another instantiation of me, please do let him... it... *me* know that, in the end, his — *my* — stalling and pointless overcaution will be... regretted.”

She brings her hands to his cheeks, his skin simultaneously feverish and icy under her touch. “Would you listen if I did?”

The smile he offers is rueful. His reddish eyes keep traveling to her lips.

“No. This wisdom seems to come only through the apprehension of one’s own mortality.” Solas’s expression grows anguished for an instant, until he schools his features into something more neutral. “Vhenan. Will you not ask me what became of you?”

She meets his gaze. “I know I am dead in your world. That much is clear.” She takes a breath, and releases it slowly. “All right. How did it happen?”

Solas’s hands trail along her back and settle on her hips. This time he pulls her into him as closely as their bodies will allow — at least in this configuration. He rests his chin on the top of her head. His voice forks into a double-echo as he speaks, and she can hear the lyrium’s discordant ruckus inside his chest. “You were captured, as were we all. It did not take Alexius long to learn of your unique condition. He saw potential in this knowledge for his efforts to free his son from the Blight. He began to experiment.” She repositions herself to be able to see his face. Solas swallows again, and, for an instant, Margo thinks he looks ill — or, iller than he already is. “You lasted longer than many, though not as long as Leliana. To this day, I am unsure where you found the poison to end it. I was glad you did.”

“Scraped it off a wall, probably. You wouldn’t believe what sorts of things grow in a dank dungeon. It’s the humidity.” The joke falls flat. “How long ago?”

“Six months, perhaps.”

Margo exhales. He’s been in here for at least six months? She forces herself to swim against the current of her panicked thoughts. This is not real. It’s a construct. Whatever this Solas is, it is an illusion. A model that doesn’t, in fact, exist. Except that his arms around her feel solid enough, and beneath the burnt rubber smell of lyrium, she still detects a whiff of ozone.

“Solas. I have to understand. What are you?” If nothing else, if she can grasp the nature of this strange model — the real/unreal paradox of it — then maybe, just maybe, there is something that they can do to get out of it. And never let it come to pass. Because, as far as sad-sack quantum possibilities go, this one is an exceptionally shitty one.

She can feel him flinch against her, his back muscles tensing under her hands. “Oh, ma’nas. I...” He takes a shuddering breath, and then coughs, the sound doubled, like his voice. He suppresses it, and after a few moments the cough subsides. “Yes,” he finally breathes. “Perhaps it is the only way to prevent this. The mistake has already been made, but it may still be possible to undo at least a portion of its potential repercussions.” He exhales, seemingly steeling himself against something. Margo looks up, frowning at his expression. For the briefest of instants, what she sees there is very close to panic. Do constructs panic?

He hesitates.

“Solas, please. Help me understand. This is not the Fade, but it’s also not *not* the Fade. I keep wandering in and out of pockets that feel more or less substantial. I can’t touch anything, except, presumably, the red lyrium or anything directly affected by it.”

There is a brief glimmer of surprise in his eyes, and then comprehension dawns. Solas’s face shutters, a kind of deadly calm settling over him. He takes a step back, disentangling himself from her embrace, the movement the result of will more than want. “Of course. Forgive me... I misunderstood you. You are asking about the status of this...” he waves a hand around, “possibility.”

Margo frowns, the confusion over his reaction raising alarm bells in the back of her mind, but she can’t quite wade her way through the brain fog. Shock, apparently, is not conducive to analytical

thinking. What had he thought she asked? It feels like she is missing something absolutely crucial, but her mind can't quite focus on it, the dreamlike quality of her surrounding pushing her to simply accept it, as one does the nonsensical elements of a dream.

"I do not have enough evidence to speculate — it is, after all, my *reality* — but Alexius's repeated experiments with the fabric of time have damaged the Veil beyond repair. It is..." he looks around, apparently searching for some kind of example to use as a demonstration, and then takes ahold of the sleeve of her jacket. His fingers pinch the material to create several folds. "It is twisted on itself, tangling the Dreaming with the Waking, without annulling the separation."

Margo strains to imagine what this would look like in practice. Well. *This* is what it looks like in practice.

"What about the red lyrium?" she asks.

He shakes his head. "I am unsure. Lyrium exists in both places — and the Elder One has found a way to cultivate its red variant. It is possible that Alexius discovered additional application for it. Perhaps to mark sites of interest, or pivotal moments, anchoring time and place together as he attempts to fashion a world to his liking."

Margo nods, her eyes widening. "He's using it as a marker? Like... a notch on a tree? Or a kind of safety pin, to hold different flaps of fabric together?"

"After a fashion. Although I do not know for certain. What has been done to the Fade... to this *world* is beyond any nightmare I could have ever conceived."

"This means that his poisoning you with the lyrium — and the fact that you seem real to me here — is epiphenomenal." She doesn't know whether that makes it better, or worse. Not to mention that she is entirely out of her depth. She needs Dorian for this discussion.

"Vhenan, you cannot linger here. If we do not know which parts of this reality affect you and which do not, then you *must* depart as soon as possible, no matter how enticing further information-gathering might be. It will not be long now before the Elder One's army is upon us."

"How do you know?"

He exhales sharply. "They are demons, ma'nas. However twisted they were during their crossing, they are still of the Fade. I can feel them."

"But where? Where do we go? How do we leave?"

Solas shakes his head. "Let us find the others. If we can locate an untainted pocket of the Dreaming, you may be able to use it to depart."

They find Dorian and Bull whispering quietly in the hall at the top of the stairs. Dorian's face is ashen beneath the tan, and his eyes seem to have doubled in size. Bull just looks... exhausted.

"Dorian. We must get out of here. This place is... wrong."

"Thank you, my dear, for pointing out the blatantly obvious. I have gathered as much."

"You must find a pocket of the Fade, undiluted by Alexius's time magic. It may be possible for you to affect the spell that sent you here from within it."

Dorian nods at the elf's explanation in flat acceptance, his natural curiosity drained from him.

They wander around, making their way slowly towards the top of the castle. All they find are corpses. In a room that bears the unmistakable hallmarks of a torture chamber, if the well-used rack is anything to go by, they find Leliana, or what is left of her. What remains of her face looks like the grinning skull from Margo's occasional odd visions.

They walk further.

Finally, at the very top of a wide stone staircase, in a large, cavernous hall, they discover Alexius. He looks... small. He is huddled over the body of a pale young man, and he pays the intruders no heed. The young man's eyes are vacant, a kind of subcutaneous necrosis mottling his skin.

A few feet from them is Evie's body, like a broken doll: an unneeded thing, discarded. Margo moans and looks away. No no no... Not this. Not like this.

Alexius has apparently used her in every way he could. Including, at the end, to power his spells. Evie's left arm is thrust out at an angle, the fingers of her hand curled softly, as if she is sleeping. The mark is nothing but a charred scar.

Margo doesn't know she has launched herself at the magister until she realizes she's flailing in place, Bull's massive arms restraining her.

"It is useless, vhenan." Solas's voice is quiet and heartbroken. "You *must* leave now."

As if in confirmation of his words, the massive doors shake under the impact of some unseen force. Margo hears strange, otherworldly screeches — half-avian, half-industrial.

Solas gestures towards a slightly raised platform at the side of the hall, where the air, to Margo's barely focusing eyes, seems tinged with a faint green shimmer, as if with the memory of a Fade rift.

"We cannot just leave you two here." Dorian's voice is furious.

"Hey. Not real, remember?" Bull rumbles a chuckle. "Now this unreal Qunari is going to kick some demon *ass* ." He growls demonstratively, but his eye is serious. "We can buy you a few minutes. Solas?"

"Dorian. You must attempt to unweave the spell from the inside."

Dorian frowns. "Ah, I see. Yes. Yes, especially somewhere where the connection with the Fade is stronger, I may be able to use the..."

"There is no time. Do it." Solas interrupts, his voice urgent.

The Tevinter mage sprints to the non-rift, but Margo lingers for a moment, and catches Solas's hand.

"I won't let this happen. I swear I won't let this happen." She meets his gaze. "Is there anything..." She can't quite finish.

His eyes grow soft, but his lips twist in a bitter smile. "Kiss me, vhenan. Though I am afraid I do not have the time to beg properly."

Margo blinks the tears out of her eyes — she can't see him through the blur — and chokes out a laugh. She reaches for his face, and pulls him down towards her.

He brushes his lips against hers — the ghost of a touch — but before she can settle into a proper

kiss, he pulls away, and shakes his head, sorrow in his eyes. “The lyrium is real enough, ma’nas. I cannot risk contaminating you.” He steps back. “Now, go.”

She hesitates for another second, then sprints off towards where Dorian stands. Her throat aches with unshed tears.

For weeks after, she will have nightmares of this precise moment. She skids next to Dorian, her lungs burning and her throat constricted in a ball of incandescent pain. Behind her, the massive oak doors burst into splinters. She turns. What is beyond them is nothing her mind can process.

Insectoid. Reptilian. Arboreal. A writhing, malignant mass. Bull rushes into the fray with a dramatic bellow. Solas casts without a staff, the movements breathtakingly graceful.

“I almost have it!” Dorian cries out.

The world wobbles like a dream bubble. The seething mass of creatures bursts into the hall, their screeches echoing off the stone walls.

Bull’s lifeless body skids down the stones like a giant rag doll.

Solas turns to her. His face is calm. A kind of ethereal stillness settles over him, and he smiles.

Ar lath ma, vhenan. The sound of his voice comes from inside her own mind. *Wake up.*

And then a giant lobsterosity with the head of a praying mantis runs a red-lyrium-tinged claw through his back. Blood, much darker than it should be, sprays from his mouth. She feels the moment of death in her own bones. His body goes limp, like a puppet whose strings were cut. The horror pulls the claw out, letting what remains of Solas crumple to the floor, shakes the gore off with absurd daintiness, like it finds the mess unsanitary, and scuttles in Dorian and Margo’s direction.

“No!” Margo chokes out, her throat raw.

And then, with no fuss at all, the world shifts and reassembles.

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They are still seated at the table, exactly as they were. Margo looks at Dorian — he has grown pale, his grey eyes haunted. Before Margo can assess the others’ reaction, her attention is drawn to Alexius. The Magister’s fists tighten, and he turns his head slowly to behold his former student.

“It would appear that I have invited a snake into my house,” he states with utterly terrifying calm. Considering that Alexius himself sports his most reptilian expression to date, the accusation would be ironic — if it weren’t for the crackle of energy gathering around the older mage. “You would throw in your talents with this *Inquisition*?” He spits out the last word as if it is a profanity.

Margo can feel magic gathering around Dorian. Bull shifts into a fighting stance, the movement slight but unmistakable. A draft of cold, dusty air carries a whiff of ozone, from which Margo concludes that Solas is ready for an escalation as well. But she dares not take her eyes off the magister.

“Gereon, what have you done?” Dorian chokes out. “Can you not see that this is madness? You... you have lost your way, old friend.”

“Do not presume to school me in morality, boy!” Alexius bellows, spittle flying from dry lips. His

eyes are utterly murderous — and completely void of reason. “Where were you when I tried to reverse Felix’s condition? He was... is *your* friend! He thinks of you as the brother he never had!” He shoots to his feet and leans forward, fists pressed into the table, looming over Dorian like an unhinged, malevolent scarecrow. “Were you helping me find the solution to the slow horror that consumes him? No. You were not. You were too busy whoring and drinking. And now...” Alexius spreads his hands, apparently to encompass the general state of affairs. “Now this.”

Margo isn’t sure whether the four of them can take on the magister. They might. But then there is a whole contingent of Tevinter mercenaries presumably hanging around the castle somewhere.

“Gereon, listen to yourself.” Dorian’s tone is dry, but composed. “You know as well as I that we have tried everything. Because, as you will recall — if you only cared to see past your own helpless fury — I was there alongside you the entire time.”

“Not everything,” Alexius grinds out. “And you were not there when it would have mattered.” And then the magister turns to Margo. “But it would seem you have brought me a present, Dorian. The model you helped me construct was faulty, and I could only get glimpses, but it would appear that your little bird has some natural immunity to the Blight, does it not?” He smiles unpleasantly.

Oh shit.

Before Dorian has a chance to retort — and before the conflict can escalate into an outright brawl — a sudden movement in the doorway draws Margo’s attention.

“Father? What is the meaning of... Dorian?”

All heads turn in the direction of the voice. In Margo’s estimation, the young man standing at the entrance to the hall is in his mid to late twenties. Like Dorian, he is naturally olive-skinned, but with a sickly pallor beneath the tan. It’s nowhere near the necrotic awfulness that she saw in the crapsack future model, however. He looks very little like his father, which makes Margo conclude that the young man takes after the matriline.

“Felix,” Alexius says quietly, and some of the anger drains out of him, replaced with such bone-deep heartbreak that Margo can’t help but almost feel for the magister. So this is the boy Alexius has traded his humanity — and the innumerable lives of others — to save. With a horrible little jolt, Margo suddenly considers the profound selfishness of parenthood. Love, it would seem, makes monsters of us all.

“Felix, it is good to see you.” Dorian gets to his feet, and, before the magister can do anything about it, he walks over and throws his arms around the younger man. Felix returns the embrace heartily, with much grinning and slapping of backs on both sides. “I had wanted to pay your father a visit before I set off to travel the south.”

“Will you be staying for a short while?” Felix asks, and while his tone is warm, Margo notices that there is something about the young man’s expression that telegraphs a warning.

“Alas, no. I fear we have overtaxed your father’s hospitality as it is.” Dorian takes a step back.

“Nonsense, Dorian.” Alexius, now once again in full control of his presentation of self, gestures invitingly. Clearly, the Magister is unwilling to kill them all in front of his son — and Dorian is not about to attack his former mentor with Felix present, either. So, as long as Felix is in attendance, they are at a stalemate. Alexius’s heavy gaze falls on Dorian. “It is late. Certainly, you would not wish to travel at night. The roads are unsafe. Stay for the evening. You can set off in the morrow.”

Margo swallows. What are the chances that they will still be alive “in the morrow”?

“You will have no objections to us leaving early?” Dorian asks, his voice carefully calibrated to sound as if he is simply being considerate in not wanting to wake up his gracious host.

“Of course. The three of you can leave. But I think I would like to borrow your little bird. Surely, you can find yourself another.”

Margo freezes in mindless fear. She catches Bull’s gaze on her, and he makes a tiny little gesture with his head. She isn’t sure what it means. It might be, “ *Not gonna happen on my watch .*” Or it might be, “ *Sorry, Blondie, sounds like a good plan to me .*”

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by the joys of modeling futures.

Next up: Consequences, most of them not good.

# Acceptable Losses

## Chapter Summary

In which Margo reflects on the politics of disposability

## Chapter Notes

The next few chapters are going to be slapped with some trigger warnings and PSAs. This chapter gets a TW for implied threat of sexual violence.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Felix volunteers to escort them to the guest chambers. When Margo gets up to follow Dorian and the others, she feels like a puppet on strings. It doesn't help that Alexius's reptilian gaze follows her every movement with cold, carnivorous interest.

A half-dozen cutthroats materialize seemingly out of nowhere, and after a quiet exchange with the magister they surround their small group. Felix, studiously pretending not to notice this, sticks to Dorian like a barnacle. Bull walks behind the two men, letting the useless bodyguard persona slip a little now that their cover has been blown. There isn't a chance to debrief him or Solas. Margo falls in step next to the elf, trying to ignore the hostile feelings emanating from the accompanying mercenaries at her back. Solas casts her a brief, questioning look. Margo averts her eyes quickly. Whenever she blinks, she sees his last moments before death, Solas's voice echoing in her head — soft, with just a tiny edge of irony. By this point, Maile's rather basic Elvhen vocabulary has churned around a few times — it's like waiting for the world's slowest processor to complete some simple task — and conjured a translation. She almost stumbles when the meaning floats into her consciousness.

So, all in all, what Margo really wants to do is curl up in a corner, stuff her head under a pillow, and maybe cry for a week. Or sleep.

Thoughts of sleep conjure Imshael, thoughts of Imshael conjure the last time she spoke with the cosmic asshole — and, by association, conjure his accursed and eerily accurate prophesying. *It was a model*, Margo reminds herself, for what feels like the hundredth time.

And then there is the other problem. In the grand scheme of things, she *is* disposable. Of course, she has known this from the start. What's one more pawn? Take her out of the game, and nothing much will change. Just more meat for the cosmic grinder. Bull would be mad not to accept Alexius's deal — one life for three isn't particularly difficult math.

Their small company stops in front of a heavy oak door. Felix pushes it open to reveal a surprisingly cozy room, lit by wall sconces and multiple large candles. The furniture is simple but comfortable, and the space looks neat, with some old but still colorful rugs to lend a splash of warmth to the gray masonry and several well-stocked bookshelves.

"I've kept it tidy," Felix says, looking just a tad embarrassed. "I did not think you would be back,

but I tend to over-prepare, as you know.” The young man looks at the rest of them. “Your friends can have the adjoining servants’ room. It isn’t much, but it is kept warm.”

Dorian’s hand lands on Felix’s shoulder. “Thank you, my friend. Will you have time to talk?”

Felix shakes his head. “Not tonight. I am due for another curative regimen. Not that they do much good other than give me terrible joint pain.” He sighs at that. Margo spots another door — a somewhat unobtrusive one — in the side wall. Bull follows Dorian into the room, and immediately sets towards what Margo assumes to be the entrance to the servants’ annex — probably to check out how defensible their quarters are. After a brief hesitation, Solas proceeds inside as well.

Margo is about to follow when a hand clasps her shoulder. She startles and looks around to see who it might belong to. It’s the sleazy ruffian from the tavern — the one who fetched Alexius when her bardic activities took a turn for the ideologically problematic.

“Not you, doll. You’re coming with us.”

Margo looks at her friends. Dorian frowns and turns to Felix. “Felix, I do not recall agreeing to your father’s bargain.”

The young man’s expression grows bereft. “I am sorry, my friend. I will make every effort to ensure the soldiers do not touch her, but that is all I can do. I cannot protect all of you.” He looks at Margo. “I am so very sorry.”

“It’s all right.” That’s Bull, and Margo meets his gaze, trying to slow down her racing heart by breathing through the terror. So. Just like that. Logically — logistically, tactically — it makes sense. She cannot fault him for this. It doesn’t change the feeling of something snapping — and plummeting — inside of her. “Nothing personal.” The Qunari watches her with an odd expression, as if he is trying to gauge her reaction. Whatever he sees there leads him to nod briefly. “But I think Blondie gets it.”

“Do you truly find such a solution tenable, Iron Bull?” Solas’s tone is not very far away from a hiss.

“Someone has to make the hard decisions,” the Qunari shrugs.

Dorian looks like he is about to protest, but then the merc, whose fingers tighten around Margo’s upper arm in a painful vise, cuts him off. It doesn’t take a genius to realize that the fellow is in charge of the cutthroat contingent.

“Enough chit-chat. Our orders are clear. Come along, doll. The less of a fuss you make, the better it’ll go for you.” He pushes her down the corridor.

For something like thirty seconds, Margo expects a skirmish. She waits for the telltale crackle of Solas’s magic. For the sucking horror of Dorian’s building necromancy spells. She waits for Bull’s bellow, full of gleeful, primordial battle rage. None of this happens. Nothing but the echo of footsteps down the worn stones, the dusty, stale air, and the Vint’s painfully tight grip on her arm.

They walk in silence for a while, slowly winding down and down to what Margo knows from the modeling spell to be the dungeon. But her escort of disreputable asshats doesn’t take her all the way to the cells. Instead, she’s corralled into a small side room on what feels like the “garden floor” — halfway below ground level if the small window beneath the ceiling is any indication. At least it’s not covered with a pane of glass — or mica, or whatever other mineral they use to make windows around here — so the room is comparatively well ventilated. Margo files that away as a

win.

She's pushed through the door. The head merc dismisses the rest of the cutthroats with some curt command in what she assumes to be Tevene — lots of fricatives and sibilants. Margo observes him as he watches their retreating backs with cold, lifeless eyes. And then the merc turns to her.

“So.” He smiles. He has blindingly white teeth, a hooked nose, and brown eyes, almost so dark the pupil disappears against the iris. His skin is a tad paler than his compatriots', with an oily sheen to it. “Tossed out like refuse, hmm? Some friends you have, doll.”

Margo swallows back the terror and forces herself to meet the creep's gaze. She knows the type. She's not about to make his day and show fear — if he's going to get his jollies anyway, no sense in making it more enjoyable for him.

“It doesn't have to end badly for you, you know? The magister — he's gone soft in the head, if you ask me.” Margo tries to place his accent. It's a combination of British and maybe German? He gives her an assessing once over, and leers. “But maybe you and I can help each other out, hmm?”

Margo clenches her fists. A line from Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* floats into her consciousness. *Don't trust, don't fear, don't beg*. Not that this is a Stalinist camp, but same rules apply. Right.

“Be more specific,” she says simply, though she's pretty sure where this is going to go.

He grins, and starts unbuckling his belt. Margo forces her expression into a derisive mask, hoping the fear doesn't show through it. “Putting the cart before the horse, aren't you, chief?” she draws. “Buy a girl dinner first.”

He scowls and Margo bites back a spiteful smirk. *Doesn't do it for you when they don't cower, does it?*

The Vint leaves his belt alone, crosses his arms over his chest, and assesses Margo with a cold expression. “I could also make your life much more unpleasant.”

Margo forces her lips into a grin. Judging by the Vint's slightly widening eyes, it must look all sorts of unaccommodating. “You could. But I guarantee you that it would be more enjoyable for all interested parties if I cooperated willingly.” She narrows her eyes. This is going to be the bluff of the century, but what did Amund say? Right. Let's gamble. “Besides, I don't think you're just after a quick tryst in a dank cell. Otherwise, I suspect we wouldn't be having this lovely chat.”

That apparently strikes the goon as hilarious. He laughs soundlessly, although the mirth never reaches his flat gaze.

“Not half-bad looking, and passably clever. That's a dangerous combination, doll.” He shuts the door with the tip of his boot, takes a few steps towards the only chair — careful not to turn his back to Margo at any point — and takes a seat. “So. Alexius's protege has joined the Inquisition and dragged you along into this mess. Not surprising, if you ask me — then again, no one did, so who am I to comment? I hate to be the bearer of bad news, sweetness, but it sounds like your organization isn't particularly good at looking out for their own.”

He lets the statement hang in the silence, but Margo doesn't bite. She can wait out an uncomfortable silence. Generic Goon has nothing on some of her former students. Now *that* was pulling teeth.

“Nothing? No reaction? So, I take it you're not just a pretty broad with a few tunes. Bard-trained?



Orlesian?”

Margo still doesn't respond, and simply stares at the bastard, quietly speculating what might be used as a blunt force instrument. Brother Genitivi's magnum opus would come in handy right about now.

“Keep mum, then.” He leans forward. “Alexius wants to keep you for his own reasons. Trust me, whatever he has planned for you will not be to your liking. But see, this is where I come in.”

Margo crosses her arms over her chest. If Generic Goon thinks she's going to help him with his one-sided conversation, he's got another thing coming.

He seems to guess that this is her approach, because he drops the ingratiating-but-threatening act — Margo supposes that being both the good and the bad cop at once is a rather thankless task — and gets down to business. “Here's my offer. I can put in a good word with the magister, make sure nothing too bad happens to you. And because I'm a generous soul, I'm even going to give you a choice in how you repay me. You could give me intel on the Herald and your little motley crew of southern fanatics, or whatever you are over there in your village. Or you could show your gratitude some other way.” The leer leaves very little doubt as to what he means. “And, who knows, if you put in a good effort, over time I might even have you legally acknowledged as mine.”

“As a slave,” Margo states dryly.

“I'm nothing like Alexius, doll. I treat my property well.”

Margo watches him carefully. She's not about to feed him intel, so that leaves the other option. It could buy her time. There is that.

“Let me think on this overnight,” she says. Generic Goon's dark eyes search her face, but she keeps on a studiously neutral mask, mixing in just a little bit of speculation to make it believable that she is tempted by the offer. Her best chances are to delay.

“If you think your friends are coming to your aid, I'd recommend you reconsider. I'd hate to see you disappointed. What's your name, little bard?”

She hesitates. “Maile,” Margo says finally.

Generic Goon cocks his head. “Isn't that ‘flower’ in your gibberish?”

Margo just shrugs. What's in a name? Although if she had ever doubted that the multiverse has a particularly malevolent sense of humor, the fact that both of her incarnations have a botanically-related name should put that to rest. Generic Goon stands up then and takes a few steps forward, planting himself too close and crowding her. Margo balls her fists, but stands her ground. Right. *Don't trust, don't fear, don't beg* .

“And I'm Cassius. So. Do we have a deal, then?”

Margo forces herself to meet his gaze. “Let me think on it.”

For a second, she's fairly sure he's not going to wait on the decision, but to her surprise, he laughs another one of his soundless cackles, and proceeds towards the door. “Don't wait too long. When your friends leave you behind tomorrow and you're all out of options, I might not be in such a generous mood.”

He closes the door behind him, and Margo hears the lock snap into place.

She spends the rest of the night examining her cell for an escape route. The window, although glassless, is crisscrossed with narrow metal bars barely wide enough to let through a hand — let alone a whole person. The floor is packed dirt. With enough time and the right tool she supposes she could dig a tunnel. The heavy wooden door is bolted from the outside — there is no lock to pick. Not even a door handle. It does have a little opening in the bottom, barred by a sheet of metal, but unless she develops the ability to shapeshift into a cat, Margo isn't getting out that way. She notes that the door opens outward — if she had something to detonate, she might be able to blow it off its hinges. Or burn it — though Margo isn't sure at all she wouldn't suffocate in the process.

Nothing else seems promising, but she still circles the room, carefully knocking on the masonry for a hollow sound — any self-respecting castle should be riddled with secret passages, servants' warrens, and escape routes. Apparently, this particular castle — or at least this particular room — is not self-respecting at all. All the walls sound bleakly homogenous.

The furniture will not win any awards either. There is one chair, one pile of rotting straw that might, with some squinting, be described as a pallet, and one metal basin in the corner with a crude plank set on top of it — apparently, what passes for the local facilities. Josie's Orlesian nobles would have a fit. Margo cackles at the thought but makes herself stop before it devolves into hysterics.

By the time the sky in her tiny window turns a pre-dawn grey, Margo is shivering with cold and sleep deprivation, but she forces herself to stay awake, pinching herself at regular intervals until her forearms are raw with the effort. On the one hand, the prospect of Imshael inspires exactly zero optimism. But if she is to be perfectly honest with herself — and at this point, self-deception seems like a uniquely unproductive exercise — she is still expecting a rescue. Bull, she gets. The Qunari has no reason to trust her. He is a military man. Acceptable losses, and all that. But surely, Solas and Dorian — who actually know her backstory — would at least make the effort. If only out of sheer intellectual curiosity, if not out of friendship or other sentiments.

When the locking mechanism rattles outside the door Margo jumps to her feet, adrenaline briefly quickening her reactions and clearing the jumbled thoughts from her head. Somehow, she has lost time. The window — if one can call it that — is letting in a narrow shaft of sunlight. Margo frowns at it. Judging by the tint of the light, she guesses it is mid-morning.

The door doesn't open. Instead, a narrow rectangle materializes at the bottom and Margo glimpses briefly the toe of a boot. A tray slides into her room through the slit, and then the opening is sealed again from the outside. She hears footsteps retreating.

She makes her way to the tray, trying to squash the sudden influx of hopeless terror. Dorian said they wanted to leave early. Is it done, then? Are they gone?

Margo examines the contents of the tray. One jug of water, one slice of stale black bread, and one bowl of unidentifiable mush. She walks over to the chair, and sits, tray on her lap. There is a crude wooden spoon. She shovels some of the mush into her mouth, but gives up quickly — she's pretty sure it's mashed root vegetable peel. Not the worst thing to eat, nutritionally speaking, but it tastes like mops. The bread isn't much better, but she forces herself to gnaw at it anyway, using the water to soften the otherwise rock-hard mass.

"Meal" finished, she returns the tray to the door but appropriates the spoon. Surely there might be a way to weaponize it. If she is going to be in here for the long haul, her keepers will probably confiscate it eventually — depending on how tightly the operation is run. As good a time as any to find out.

Once the shaft of light travels across the floor and disappears entirely, Margo forces herself to confront the obvious. At this stage, it is unlikely help is forthcoming — at least in the immediate future. The others are most likely gone. She bites down the helpless hurt — feeling offended or betrayed over it isn't going to get her anywhere productive. It sure as hell isn't going to improve her chances at survival.

She tries to shift her mindset to Bull's. From his perspective, she is just a soldier, and soldiers are, by their very definition, fungible. Solas and Dorian might have protested, but, in the end, there is little they can do while weaponless, vastly outnumbered by enemy forces, and offered the opportunity to walk out scott-free. She kicks the idea that they might have not even tried — that *Solas* might not have tried too hard, in the end — under the rug. And then imagines herself jumping on the long-suffering surface. There. Down with all her other monsters. Have fun in there. She decides that at least she can have the rug be Persian. Why not? It ties the room together.

She returns to her thoughts on Bull and steels herself against her brain's implacable penchant for analysis: no matter what else is happening, that thing will just churn out models like they're going out of fashion. Thus, no one likes prisoners of war, because prisoners of war are apt to squeal. Does she have information that would seriously compromise the Inquisition? She swallows. Yes. Yes, she does. Depending on how much Alexius saw of the crapsack future — since he wasn't present in the same way that she and Dorian were, it is entirely possible that he *didn't* see the same things. Then Evie's status might be relevant information indeed. Capture her and make her Tranquil, and he has Evie's rift-closing capacity at his disposal.

And this brings Margo right around to the main point. If she were in Bull's shoes, she would try to kill her. Poison, maybe. She eyes the tray. It is doubtful that he would have the time — or the means — but if Bull is in the Qun's version of the KGB, then it isn't outside of the realm of possibility.

The following hours are occupied in much the same way. Margo fluctuates between hope for a rescue — maybe they'll send Sera, or Harding — and the increasing certainty that she's wasting emotional and intellectual energy when she could be devising a plan for escape. She's got a spoon. Might as well start digging, right?

That line of thought begs the question of what she might do next. Go back to the Inquisition? And return as a POW? Knowing Torquemada, that will get her court martialed, tortured, and executed faster than you can say "colluding with Tevinter."

Avvar village. Oral history of the Avvar. She'll be the new Brother Genitivi. Is he still alive? If he is, maybe she can write to him. Propose a collaborative project. They could apply for a grant together. She would never have to see the Inquisition again. Not Leliana, not Bull, not Dorian. Not Solas.

She'll miss Varric. And Blackwall. And Sera — she'll miss the crazy elf. She'll have to see if Amund might be willing to lend her a hand. If she manages to escape, best leave the area — the Hinterlands are crawling with Torquemada's agents. She will need an atlas or a map. Her geography of Thedas is still tenuous at best.

But then there is Evie. The carnivorous, soulless bastards will eat her up and not even notice.

Sometime in the late afternoon, the door opens to let in Generic Goon. Margo looks up, quickly hiding inside her straw mat the spoon that she has been slowly sharpening against the stones. She half expects the Vint to demand "gratitude" — and so is glad to have the spoon within easy reach — but he is businesslike and formal.

“I am to accompany you to see Magister Alexius,” he states and holds the door open for her to exit.

Margo gets to her feet and follows the merc into the hallway.

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by overwrought speculations about "What would The Iron Bull do?"

Next up: Alexius, and worse.

# Faustian Bargains

## Chapter Summary

In which Margo makes a bad situation worse.

## Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: This chapter has implicit references to a miscarriage. Please read accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Margo is led to a room that looks like a mixture between an academic's office and a mad scientist's laboratory. The place is almost cozy in its familiarity. There are mugs with half-finished tea crowding every available surface. As well as empty bottles of wine — some repurposed as candleholders. Papers and books are littered everywhere. She recognizes alchemy paraphernalia — very high-grade and expensive, if the excess of silver, gold, and copper is any indication — and other stuff that her mind classifies unhelpfully as “unidentified ritual objects.”

Alexius is seated at a wide wooden desk. When he looks up, Margo frowns. His expression is incongruous. He looks affable. Friendly, even. The demented glint from the previous night is entirely absent, replaced by a kind of focused purposefulness. Margo represses a shudder. Without the overlay of madness, what makes this man so horrid is that he is so utterly familiar. In a different incarnation, he could have been on her dissertation committee. Just another scholar, distracted, messy, passionate about his work, driven by an insatiable curiosity. In another incarnation, this could have been a man she might have been on cordial terms with — debated theory, excoriated rival schools of thought. Asked for comments on a piece of writing before putting it through publication. (Until, that is, it turns out that he shirks all the admin work and harrasses young female faculty.)

“Come in, come in!” Alexius gets up, and gestures to a chair right on the other side of his desk. Margo walks over and sits. “Please. Accept my sincere apologies for all the unpleasantness.” He closes a leather-bound journal and sets the quill back into its inkpot. “Your associates have left. I hope you are not feeling too cross about the charade of keeping you in such pitiful conditions. Now that they are out of the way, perhaps we could arrange for your accommodations to be more civilized.”

Margo stills. What in the Void is the evil bastard playing at?

“You look surprised. Let me explain.” Alexius picks up a bottle of wine and arranges two goblets in front of him. Margo is entirely uncertain about their cleanliness, but this doesn't seem to deter the magister. He pours the wine into both and sets one of the glasses in front of her. “Please, do join me. Alas, I find I have grown dependent on the numbing properties of this beverage. Does your world have an equivalent?”

Oh, dear merciful unspecified deity. Shit.

“Ah, yes. You wonder how I realized that you are from, shall we say, elsewhere? It is very simple. The model. The reason I did not follow you — and my wayward pupil — fully into the simulation is that I realized something was causing terrible interference. It was so stark, in fact, that I chose to remain largely on the outside, attending to the model’s more... logistical aspects. You are not a mage, so I shan’t bore you with the specifics. However, imagine my surprise when I realized the cause of the inference was *you*. A crude little elven minstrel.” Alexius smiles and twirls his wineglass. He doesn’t drink. “Appearances can be so deceptive, don’t you find? In any event, from there, I simply siphoned a portion of the amulet’s power to have a peek at your memories. A primitive trick when one is used to manipulating time itself. And yet, the short glimpses I saw were so profoundly unfamiliar that they forced me to entertain the only logical — if farfetched — conclusion.” He pauses. Margo’s heart thuds painfully in her chest. “You are from our very distant future, are you not?”

Margo forces herself to pick up the goblet, but doesn’t drink, settling into twirling the glass in her fingers in imitation of her host. All things considered, Alexius’s theory is not all that ridiculous, and she is not about to disabuse him of the notion.

The magister is clearly waiting for a response. Margo decides it would likely not be wise to try to wait him out.

“If you wouldn’t mind, may I clarify something?” she allows herself to slip into her habitual academic register. If nothing else, the dissonance between the language, her appearance, and Alexius’s expectations should throw him off-kilter a little. Might as well mess with his prejudices. “You realized I was something other than what you had expected, but you kept this realization from the others. Why? From what I have learned of your situation, I am assuming that you are primarily interested in me due to my resistance to the... Blight?”

Alexius’s smile is unsettling with its genuine warmth. He takes a tiny sip of wine. There is very little left of the unhinged mage of the night before. This man is completely in control of himself. “Yes and no. Your fleshy avatar — if you allow me such a crass turn of phrase — seems naturally immune, from what I glimpsed from our modeling. A rare and valuable quality, but not exceptional. I will ask you to... help me with my son, since I believe you, of all people, would understand my plight. But this is only part of it. It is your capacity to control the Fade that I am interested in. Such talent has not been observed in generations, you know.” His eyes sparkle with curiosity... bordering on greed. “When did it come back? It is what allowed you to travel here, is it not?”

At Margo’s blank expression, Alexius chuckles again. “Do you truly believe that I would think it was *Dorian* who broke the spell?” He shakes his head. “Oh my dear child, Dorian is a magical prodigy in many respects, but manipulating the Fade has never been one of his strengths. Of course it was you. I felt you rend the entire complex structure apart as if it were nothing more than a measly spider web.” He leans in. “And yet, you appear untrained. All emotion, no control. Have the techniques changed so much? And you are not even a mage. Were you sent by another? Or is Fadewalking so widespread in the future that it no longer correlates with magical training? That, my dear, would be something to behold. But I am getting ahead of myself. Imagine what you could become with proper instruction. Do you realize how absolutely rare your kind of somnari are for us? With your help, I could unlock the true potential of this amulet. I could remake the past.” He takes a shuddering breath. “I could save my son.” Alexius’s tone shifts towards the confidential. “You have seen what this world is made to be with the advent of the Elder One. Is this why you have come? To prevent it? Of course it is. I too believe there may be a middle way. With you at my side, we could find it. We could stop this madness, this senseless war, this meaningless conflict that has fractured Thedas. We could restore peace.” He fixes his eyes on her, their color amber in the candlelight. “And, who knows, perhaps we could find a way for you to return home?”

Margo tries to hold her face still. It doesn't take much speculation to know what she would become under this man's tutelage. It is simple. Her mind, helpful as ever, provides a concise model. It would start slowly. With Felix. She would become attached — it is easy to like the young man. But more importantly, this is a deep tendency that is core to what she is. To care for the weeds — the forgotten, the doomed, the unneeded. She can no more transcend this than she can become other than what she is, in this world or the next. And little by little, with Felix her responsibility, her priorities would align with the magister's. Little by little, she would see him as less monstrous. Little by little, she would inch her way down the slippery slope.

Nor has she forgotten Alexius's cold reptilian eyes from the night before. This is a mask. A clever, convincing mask. But a mask nonetheless.

"Let me consider it," she finally says. She needs time. Time to run from this. To find a way out. Though it's unlikely the magister will let her off the hook quite so easily without something in return. "In the meantime, might I be useful to you to help stabilize Felix? He strikes me as an exceptional young man. I would be glad to help." As far as Margo is concerned, this is her only strong card. She might as well play it.

Alexius's eyes narrow. "What is there to consider? You believe your Inquisition would give you so much as a passing thought? Trust me, they will not. They do not know what you are, do they?" He clasps his hands in front of him. "You are an intelligent woman. I had garnered as much during our encounter in the tavern. That song of yours... Very clever work. You must tell me some time what its original context is. But your friends..." he smirks, "such as they are... were only too eager to take me up on my offer. Do you think that any of them raised a single objection? The Qunari, I dare say, was as happy as a freshly anointed magister. Dorian might have had some gripes, but if he did, he kept them prudently to himself. And your elven friend was as impassive as one of those insipid statues that seem to be so in vogue in Minrathous."

Margo makes a herculean effort not to flinch. Instead, she slowly brings her wine to her lips and forces herself to take a tiny sip. Even if it's poisoned, the chances that the dose is critical would be low.

"They are military men. It is understandable," she finally says, and she gives herself a mental pat on the back for sounding so damn reasonable. She doesn't *feel* reasonable. "Let me think, magister."

"Gereon," the mage corrects. "I suspect you and I will be on first-name basis in no time. You will soon realize that I am the soundest option." He pauses. "But you are right. I would ask for your assistance with my son's treatment, and I am grateful that you offer it freely."

Margo nods. "What do you need of me?"

As it turns out, what he needs from her is blood. And a whole lot of it. Maybe Felix's therapy involves transfusions.

Woozy from blood loss, and barely fazed by the fact that blood donations are done through magical means — and involve large airborne spheres of the red stuff slowly floating up from her punctured veins and into copper receptacles — Margo is led to her cell by Generic Goon. He cops a feel on his way, but she is too weak to do anything about it. As soon as she is in her cell, she collapses on her pallet. Vaguely, as if through a fog, she registers that, despite Alexius's promise, her accommodations have not been changed. Which leads her to conclude that his suddenly found politeness is contingent on her dancing to the tune of the piper. No surprise there.

Cassius doesn't linger, thank unspecified deity, and Margo decides that he's under specific orders

on that particular topic. Once the door is closed, she struggles against exhaustion. The rectangle of her window has turned a dark blue. She can see a few stars.

Margo tries to fight sleep, but, in the end, sleep prevails.

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“Hello, da’elgar. Have you missed me?”

No surprises there, either. They are in Solas’s hut in Haven. The setting is so familiar — down to the ridiculous portrait of the evil abbot on the wall — that Margo feels her throat constrict with sudden, unshed tears.

“What do you want?” she says, not even bothering to turn in the direction of the voice. She focuses on the evil abbot instead. At least it’s humorous.

The cosmic asshole, not willing to let this disregard for his illustrious presence slide, glides to her side. Margo dignifies the creature with a perfunctory glance. Apparently, it decided to mix things up a bit. It is embodying Solas from the crapsack future, complete with the red lyrium glow. Its movements and expressions are a perfect replica.

“You don’t pull punches, do you?” It is probably a bad idea to engage the thing in conversation, but Margo feels unmoored, adrift in a sea of rising nihilism. Why not engage? At least, it seems to speak the truth, on occasion.

“Is this form displeasing you? From what I can gather it is the closest to your heart at the moment — and since you stated in no uncertain terms that your daughter is off-limits...” It shrugs and smiles warmly. “One must accommodate.”

“It’s fine.” Margo turns away to survey some irrelevant nicknack on the shelf. “What do you want?”

“A mutually beneficial trade, of course.” Red lyrium Solas — complete with his anguished, tender gaze — takes a few paces to stand in front of her.

Margo looks briefly, then averts her eyes, fighting the burn of tears. There. Some random basket in the corner. That’ll do. “What an unexpected turn of events,” she states dryly.

“If you wish to survive your predicament with your morals intact, you must escape.” The tone is such a perfect replica of Solas’s that Margo has to squeeze her eyes shut against the sudden wave of heartbreak. This feeling, whatever it is, does not serve her. Under the rug with it.

“And this is where you tell me that you’re here to help me do just that.” She takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. “What do you want in exchange?”

Some vague part of her mind feebly tries to press the panic button. She is bargaining with Imshael. On the other hand, isn’t the entire nature of the dynamic such that, no matter what her choices are, he still manages to feed? Why not dictate the terms on which he does it, then?

“A trifle.”

Margo barks a laugh. “Right. I already have a bridge in this exact color, thank you.”

The thing wearing Solas’s face looks puzzled for a moment, then chuckles.



“I see. You think me disingenuous, da’elgar, but I am not. I am, you might say, invested in your future.”

Margo forces herself to look at the thing. If she watches it for long enough, she can see the cracks in its disguise. She cocks her head to the side. “Why? What’s the long game, Imshael? Surely not possession?”

The “choice spirit” throws his head back and laughs, the sound rattling with the red lyrium in its fake lungs. “Oh, ma da’elgar, you are such an entertaining little thing. Even if I were, I would certainly not choose a body that is already occupied. Too... sloppy for my tastes. And besides, what is that delightful expression? ‘That would be too vulgar a display of power,’ yes?”

Great. They’re down to this — cosmic asshole quoting *The Exorcist* at her. She’s pretty sure he already cycled through *The Silence of the Lambs*, so what’s next?

“Fine. What are you offering?” Even though they are in the Fade, her heartbeat accelerates. “To be clear, I am not agreeing to anything yet.”

Non-Solas nods solemnly. “Of course. Such deals must be sealed formally. I am no vulgar trickster.” He starts circling her. “You have met the Orlesian ‘knight,’ have you not? He is not so far. And, dare I say, should I convey a message, he would come marching to the rescue. Who knows, he might even succeed. Your other ‘friends’ will not come for you.” She can hear the air-quotes in his tone. “And I fear that the magister’s plans are not quite as... benevolent as he would have you believe. But you know this, of course.”

“Why do you want me to escape?” It seems like a perfectly legitimate question.

Non-Solas’s lips fold into a familiar rueful smile. “As I said, I am invested in your future. Believe me, poppet, I am your best alternative.”

“Sure, sure, and I’m a crocodile,” Margo confirms with a pleasant expression and a sage nod. Non-Solas frowns. “And in return? Let me guess.” She brings her hand to her heart in a theatrical gesture, and mimics the thing’s intonation. “A simple kiss.”

The creature’s frown deepens. Apparently, it does not like to be mocked. “No, not a kiss. I have the distinct feeling you are not in a particularly amorous mood. Perhaps at a later date. What I want is a tiny thing, as I said. Something for which you have no use. A... memory.”

It is Margo’s turn to frown.

“A specific one?”

“Indeed.”

She narrows her eyes. “Which?”

The thing represses a smirk. “The one of you and the Tevinter mage whom your body’s previous occupant bedded.”

“Why in the Void would you want *that*?” Then an idea hits her, and Margo makes a disgusted face. “Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

“Well?”

“Let me think.” Stalling. Margo’s new favorite tactic. With more time, she might be able to regain

enough focus and strength to try to manipulate the Fade. Or to find an alchemical enhancer. Or get a message out to Solas — if she can. Not that there are any guarantees that he would try to get her out, of course. Margo forces herself to take another breath. Just a day ago the idea that the elf might not at least try to help her would have never crossed her mind. She can almost hear Baba's words. *Ah, my soul, it is not the trickster's fault that the fool is trusting.* She swallows. Right. *Don't trust, don't fear, don't beg.* The broader problem remains. She needs time to find her way out.

She looks at Imshael. "I need to think about it," she repeats. To her surprise, the creature nods in acquiescence.

"Think, then. I am certain I will see you shortly."

Margo wakes up on the rotting straw, her entire body shaking. Strangely enough, there are no other unpleasant symptoms.

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It is only by the end of the fourth day of her imprisonment that Margo finally accepts the fact that there will be no rescue. On day two, she begins to dig a tunnel with her spoon. It's a great spoon. Sharp on one side — in case she gets a chance to stab someone — and spoon-like on the other. At this rate, however, the tunnelling will take her years. She uses the latrine to conceal the hole — the metal basin is wide enough and disgusting enough that she doubts anyone would want to poke around beneath the planks on which it rests. If anyone asks, she'll say that she's doing everyone a favor by digging a sewage pipe.

Margo packs the excavated earth around the perimeter of the room. It's a temporary solution at best. She will have to spread the earth around the floor eventually.

At the end of the second day, Generic Goon pays her a visit and demands payment. Margo laughs in his face, insinuates that it might end in "dismemberment" for him — and then threatens to rat him out to Alexius. He promises to make her life miserable, but leaves his pants on.

Once a day, she is taken into Alexius's study. At first, he just takes more blood — much less than the first time, but enough to keep her weak. On the third day, with a long and apologetic diatribe — and increasingly more insistent demands that she make the decision to formally ally herself with him and let him "direct her talents" (whatever that entails) — he asks whether he could extract bone marrow. Margo blanches. It's a horrible procedure in her own world, so what in the Void is it going to be in Thedas? Even if it is magical in nature — like the blood harvesting — there is no way this will go over well.

She agrees.

It is every bit as awful as she expects, but she passes out from the pain early on. On the upside, they leave her well enough alone on day four. (She scratches marks into the floor by her bed with her most excellent spoon). Margo spends her "day off" on the straw pallet, fluctuating between species of non-sleep and non-wakefulness. Much of the fluctuating involves incoherent but gruesome visions of the crapsack future.

She gets a new visitor: an elven mage by the name of Flora or Fiona or Fauna — she can't quite recall which — who tends to her but says little. By evening, Margo is well enough to get up on her own and eat her meal. It's marginally better than usual — and includes an overcooked slab of meat. Better overcooked than undercooked, Margo decides. It probably used to be a rat.

She makes the decision while masticating the remains of the rodent mignon.

“Hello, da’elgar. You called?”

Margo sits down on a chair in Solas’s hut and motions for Imshael to take the opposite seat. She is too weak to weave her surroundings — it is whatever her mind defaults to.

“I have decided,” she says.

The creature looks shocked at this — and then, slowly, a delighted smile creases its features.

“I have a condition,” Margo adds quickly. “After this deal is struck, you leave me alone unless expressly invited.”

It frowns. “Out of the question, poppet. This is not how this works.”

Margo shakes her head. “I know you feed on me. And I know the choices you offer are always crap. I have no doubt that, should I accept your offer now, it will benefit you more than it will benefit me. But my guess is that it will give you enough... nutrients to last some time. I want a guarantee that you will leave me alone for long enough to get things sorted and not get myself killed. This benefits us both, so don’t get greedy.” She smiles unpleasantly. “Quid pro quo, Clarice.”

“And wait until you develop a new way to keep me out?” It chuckles. “I do not think so.”

Margo fixes the thing with a stare that she hopes telegraphs calm. And in fact, she doesn’t feel the panic she was expecting. Just a kind of bone-deep resignation. “I suppose it’s a risk you’re just going to have to take, isn’t it? But you’re a clever spirit. I’m sure you’ll develop new tactics.”

They watch each other for a few moments with what is probably matching assessing expressions.

“You *are* full of surprises, da’elgar.”

Margo ignores the praise, or the expression of grudging admiration — she isn’t sure whether it is familiar or not and decides the thought doesn’t serve her regardless.

“You know that time is meaningless for one such as I,” it finally offers.

“Your problem,” Margo says. “I want a month. After that, you’re free to come by and resume your whole ‘I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house down’ routine.”

For a second, the thing looks confused. “It is not a reference I am familiar with,” it finally offers.

“Your problem,” Margo repeats. “Do we have a deal?”

It pauses for a long time. And then it smiles — and there is nothing of Solas in the feral rictus.

“The deal is struck,” it says, and there is a strange echo to the utterance, something that she feels deep down in her very essence — whatever the hell that is, these days.

Non-Solas rises, and something beneath or behind the mask rises with him, though its contours are unfathomable to Margo’s cognitive apparatus. It steps towards her. She forces herself not to cringe away. But the motion it makes is deceptively innocuous. It passes the perfect facsimile of Solas’s long, delicate fingers over Margo’s lap, as if plucking a flower. And in the next instant, it is gone.

Margo wakes up with a feeling of sticky warmth between her legs. The cramps are not all that much worse than what she remembers her teenage periods to have been like — the crippling pain

went away after she had Lily. She's not entirely certain this is what she thinks it is, but, counting the weeks backwards, it certainly adds up. Occam's razor. She stumbles over to the basin, pulls down her pants, and sits down on the rough wooden plank. The pain comes in waves. She rocks back and forth gently, her hands clasped against her abdomen.

Her body is too dehydrated to produce tears. Margo stares blindly into the darkness, and sings quietly to herself.

*Hushabye, don't you cry  
Go to sleep, my little baby  
When you wake, you shall have  
All the pretty little horses*

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter is brought to you by a public service announcement: before making deals with demons, read the fine print.

Next up: Escape from Redcliffe

# The Girl in the Tower

## Chapter Summary

In which Margo receives help from an unlikely source, and comes across a new window of opportunity.

## Chapter Notes

Content Warning: reference to miscarriage in early part of chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The bleeding doesn't stop, but eventually its quality changes. Less clumpy, more of a steady stream. Not good. Margo doesn't know exactly how much time she spends squatting over the filthy latrine, but at length she forces herself to a standing position, pulls up her trousers, and stumbles over to the door. Her head feels like it is stuffed full of cotton, and her eyes don't seem to be working properly, so she navigates by feel.

Once her fingers touch the wooden planks, Margo leans against them and tries to call for help. Her voice is faint, barely a croak. All she wants to do is to lay down and sleep. She forces herself to remain standing. The fabric of her trousers clings to her skin, sticky and unpleasantly tepid. She tries to pound on the boards, but lifting her fist takes too much effort, as if she is moving through water.

*Think*. The order is vague and far away. The part of her mind that is not preoccupied with critical failure tries to make the connection between the removal of a memory in the Fade and the physical consequences in the waking world. Is the relationship causal? On a better day, it would be an interesting analytical puzzle. This is certainly not that day. Even the idea that she is dying from blood loss feels distant now, like something strictly academic — with no direct bearing on her specifically. Besides, so far, it's not the worst kind of death. A quiet fading.

Margo allows herself to slide down into a sitting position, her shoulder braced against the door for support. Very slowly, with fingers that do not obey, she begins to untie the laces of her boot. She is not sure how long the task takes her. She loses time. Eventually, the boot slides off. She stares in the general direction of where it is in her hands with vague confusion. Why did she take off the footwear?

After a few long moments, she remembers. She flips the boot in her hands and uses the wooden heel to pound against the boards. It's not a particularly loud sound, but it's loud enough that she can hear it echo down the hallway.

Eons pass. She loses more time, floating in and out of consciousness. When Margo is conscious, she resumes the pounding, but each time it takes more work. Eventually, when she floats into focus again, she realizes she doesn't have the strength to lift her hand. She huddles over herself, the boot still in her lap. By this point, she is numb. At least the pain is gone. The edges of her vision fill with a faint, greenish glow — a sort of Fade tint that is both familiar and welcoming. She can hear

quiet whispers, just at the edge of awareness. Shadows ripple in the darkness, like the faint contours of unfathomable sea creatures, glimpsed in the watery depths.

One of the shapes condenses with a soft phosphorescence, and Margo's eyes are drawn to it, as if to a beacon — the only thing of any substance and light in the inky, stuffy murk. She is surprised to realize the glow is humanoid. Maybe it's a mermaid? Do mermaids have legs? She can't quite remember which half is supposed to be a fish.

She squints, but her eyes no longer seem to work. She is looking out with some other sense, one she has no words for.

*"Ah, my soul, what trouble has found you?"* The voice is coming from everywhere and nowhere at once.

The sob startles Margo into the sudden realization that she still has a physical body.

"Baba?" she whispers, trying to blink her eyes into focus. The vision doesn't dissipate. "Baba... Are you here to take me home?" Margo tries to smile. "I think I'm ready."

The glowing form, whose contours sharpen into a familiar, tall, kerchiefed, slightly stooped figure, chuckles wryly.

*"Ay ay ay, little thistle, your old Baba raised you hardier than that. You're not the first to lose a seedling. Nor will you be the last."* The figure floats over to Margo and crouches beside her. In the whirling, luminescent tendrils that constitute the presence, Margo glimpses Baba's strong nose, knowing smile, and slate-grey eyes, a cunning sparkle glinting in their depths.

Margo lets her eyelids droop closed. She can still see the apparition. "I'm so tired, Baba."

The old woman tsks. When she speaks, there is a steely implacability beneath the sing-song tone. *"Dry your tears, heartling. The world is a spinner's plaything. You are of my roots, and our roots run deep. We are the ones that endure. New things grow where old things died. Everything returns. Besides, it isn't your time to leave the wheel. There is much work ahead."*

Margo forces her eyes to open. She wants to argue, but she doesn't have the energy. And then, suddenly, she is flooded with a deep sense of embarrassment — which is sort of incongruous considering the circumstances. Incongruity aside, it snaps her back into focus. Baba's right. The least she can do is stop wallowing.

"I don't think anyone is coming," she finally manages. Her lips are cold and move with difficulty.

*"No one is coming? Since when does old Baba not count?"* The apparition chortles quietly. *"The dandelion doesn't wait for the water to drop from the sky. It stretches its taproot to reach for it between the stones. The self-heal doesn't wait for the bee to alight on its pollen. It lures her with pretty petals and heady perfume. The burdock doesn't hope for the bird to eat its fruit to spread its seeds — it bites into the fur and lets the wolf carry it far from home, so it can grow elsewhere. If help isn't coming, little weed, then you'd better help yourself."*

The luminescent shape briefly hovers closer, and Margo is wrapped in a tingly sort of warmth. She smells wormwood and juniper. Papery lips brush a kiss against her forehead.

And then Baba melts into air. The greenish tint at the edges of Margo's vision recedes.

She finds enough strength for another volley of taps against the door.

At length, her ears pick up footsteps.

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It would be easier if she blacked out entirely, but she does not, and thus the next half hour is every bit as unpleasant and humiliating as one might imagine under the circumstances. Margo is discovered by no other than Generic Goon. After yanking her to her feet, clearly suspicious that this is some ruse, and realizing what state she is in, he swears a blue streak and lets her crumple back to the floor with another expletive and an expression of horrified disgust. He then retreats down the hallway, presumably to fetch more competent help.

Margo drifts. Later, her eyes open to behold the short elven brunette who had cared for her after the bone marrow harvesting, accompanied by Alexius in the flesh.

“She was with child?!” Alexius grinds out at the mage. The brunette doesn’t even flinch. “Why was I not told?”

“Because, my lord, you would not let me examine her before subjecting her to the procedures.” The mage’s tone is weary.

Alexius seethes but apparently has no retort prepared. “If you suspected it, Fiona, then you should have broached the subject,” he finally states. “Attend to her. And have some of your colleagues collect the tissues. They should be studied carefully, in case they hold a clue to the resistance against the Blight.”

Margo watches the magister storm off down the hallway.

After that, things get vague. At some point, Margo is wrapped in a blanket and carried somewhere, but she drifts off. The next time she comes to, she is on a bed in a cramped, overheated room. Her clothes have been changed, and it seems that someone cleaned her off. The elven mage — Fiona — is forcing her to drink something that smells strongly of elfroot and faintly of some other herb that she can’t quite identify. Margo gulps the liquid down and collapses back onto the cot. Two mages — Fiona, and another woman with dark skin, shorn hair, and yellowish eyes — take turns flooding her body with healing magic.

Margo tries to focus, to get a sense of her new surroundings, but her mind is heavy and dull. Keeping her eyes open requires too much effort, so she lets them drift closed and focuses on what she can hear instead. She remains very still, conserving energy.

“Je crois qu’elle s’est endormie,” Fiona comments eventually.\*

It takes Margo a few seconds to realize they are speaking a variant of French. She files the two women away under “Orlesian.” Fortunately, her linguistic fluency has ported along with the rest of her skillset, and understanding the conversation only requires a quick mental switch.

There is a long pause. “We should count ourselves lucky she did not bleed to death. This will cost us, Grand Enchanter.”

“I will not be blamed for this, Matilde.” Fiona’s voice is irritated. “We could not have known. If anyone is responsible, it is Alexius. We both warned him that an examination by a medic was in order.”

“But we did not insist,” Matilde sighs.

“It was not our duty to insist. Besides, there is the possibility that the girl took an abortifacient

when it suited her.”

“I find it much more probable that the procedures she has undergone have brought this on.” Matilde’s tone is dry. “Whatever the cause, it is difficult to say for certain before the quickening: I, for one, am not convinced there had been a pregnancy. Did you take note of the abdominal scar?”

Margo doesn’t see the other mage’s response, but she can hear the shrug in her tone. “We do not know what caused it.”

Another resigned sigh from Matilde. “In either event, it is not our affair, Fiona. I doubt she will last much longer at the rate Alexius is using her. But we have our own to worry over. We have observed an improvement in Felix over the last three days, have we not? That is what is relevant. We must make sure she lives for as long as possible.”

“Yes.” A pause from Fiona. “Let us check on Marcus, before second crow. It shouldn’t be long now, I fear.”

Matilde sniffs. “How very timely that Magister Alexius will have a new subject for his experiments, then. Truly, what streak of remarkable luck for our lord and master.”

“Hush, my friend. This is not the Game, and we are not in Orlais, but the walls still have ears.”

At length, the two women begin to gather their things. Margo stays still, and keeps her breathing even.

“Make sure you lock the door, Matilde. She is in no shape to wander around, but better safe than sorry.”

*Oh, yeah? Watch me,* Margo thinks acerbically.

When she hears the lock click shut, she forces herself into a sitting position. Her head spins from the low blood pressure. So. Neither healing magic nor the tonics seem to entirely remedy heavy blood loss. Good to know, for future reference. She looks at her new clothes. The tunic is simple, though the fabric is of decent quality — a thin wool of some sort. The pants are the sort of loose, homespun trousers the more heavily armored soldiers tend to wear under their armor. She has seen both Cassandra and Blackwall sport variants of these. All in all, some kind of standard-issue pajamas. At least they’re not striped. Or bright orange. There’s that. Under the trousers, she finds a basic set of underwear, but no telltale padding — which makes her conclude that the mages have not only stopped the bleeding but either alchemically or magically removed the rest of the shedding uterine lining while she was out of commission. She winces. Margo Duvalle, lab rat.

With a mental apology to last night’s rodent steak for her inadvertent cannibalism, Margo swings her legs over the side of the bed, waits out another bout of dizziness, and surveys her surroundings. Her eyes alight on an alchemy table. Well, well, well. She makes herself stand up and walk over, still a little wobbly, but her strength is returning slowly. She won’t be running a marathon in the immediate future, but little steps, and all that. There are some remnants of an elfroot potion in a glass beaker on a rudimentary burner and an array of clay jars containing powdered ingredients on the shelf. After some sniffing and poking around, Margo locates a mixture that appears to contain royal elfroot, if the purplish leaves and pungent, bitter aroma are anything to go by. Right. That will do. She downs the remains of the elfroot potion, locates a jug of clean water for brewing, and sets the new decoction on the fire.

Auntie’s Compendium would come in handy right about now, but she left it, along with her armor and weapons, in Sera’s care. Margo wonders briefly what became of their stuff — it never did



make it to the team, likely because Alexius spirited them away too quickly.

At the thought of her former team, Margo crushes a pang of helpless hurt. She is waiting for the emotion to transmute into cold rage — or something else that doesn't feel quite so vulnerable — but it's taking its sweet time. Perhaps the process needs an accelerant.

Pragmatics, she reminds herself. Focus on pragmatics. Neither sulking nor seething is going to help her get out. She walks around the room to examine her new territory. The space is a makeshift infirmary *qua* alchemy lab, with an emphasis on makeshift. None of the fancy equipment she spied in Alexius's office is here — this stuff is maybe a grade below what Master Adan uses.

There is a window. She walks over it, trepidation making her heart pound faster. It isn't locked. She flings it open — there are no metal bars on the other side of the pane. Then she looks out. Oh.

The drop is not gargantuan — maybe forty feet — but she wouldn't survive a jump to the jagged rocks below, and the sheer surface of the castle's wall cannot be scaled without some serious rappelling equipment. Beneath, the lake laps at the stones with a quiet, rhythmic rumble. Margo watches the cerulean sky. It is close to dawn, and the giant moon hangs low and tawny over the horizon. So, this is the side where the sun sets, Margo decides — whichever side that is.

Once the potion has thickened into an aromatic, purplish tonic, Margo gulps it down as fast as she can, trying not to scald her tongue too much in the process. This variant of the plant is noticeably more potent. The pulling, aching looseness in her lower abdomen subsides. More importantly, her thoughts clear to a sharp focus, which makes her conclude that the potion contained some kind of upper.

From there, Margo assesses her new accommodation with a more critical eye while her mind cycles through several scenarios. She takes note of a large chest in the corner, and of the sconces low on the walls that provide her only source of illumination. The bed is covered in a blanket, with simple sheets underneath. After some rummaging around, Margo finds a set of small shears in a chest of drawers near the alchemy table. They are little more than children's scissors, with rounded blades, likely used for cutting bandages or clothes off a patient. Aside from that, the drawers contain towels, thread, and an eclectic assortment of clothes, probably appropriated for the good of the collective from the room's episodic occupants. The ones who didn't make it. There is nothing else sharp or dangerous. Her minstrel clothes and boots are nowhere in sight, likely removed for further examination and disposal. One of the sets of discarded clothing seems to belong to a female commoner — Margo guesses a servant. Perhaps one of the unfortunate souls Alexius used to power his blood magic. After a brief hesitation, Margo extracts them, steps out of her standard issue pajamas, and dons the skirt, blouse, and basic bodice. The clothes are loose and too long on her. She has to lace the bodice to its narrowest capacity: its previous occupant had been somewhat more generously endowed. Task finished, she appropriates a set of bandages to fashion footwraps.

From there, Margo works quickly. She pulls the bedsheets from the horsehair mattress and uses the shears to cut them into strips. After looping and tying the ends around the leg of the bed, she braids the fabric into a simple plait. Once she runs out of sheets, she uses the towels from the chest of drawers to add length to the rope — until she runs out of towels. After that, she uses the clothes.

By the time Margo is finished, her palms are slick with sweat from the constant, low-grade dread of being discovered. She grabs the pile of rope, walks out towards the window, and tosses it out. A divvy in the stone provides a toehold, and she props her elbows on the windowsill to take a peek at her handywork. Margo smiles grimly into the gloom. The rope doesn't reach all the way to the water, but it's not that far off — a plausible jump. Morning fog drifts off the lake, softening the outline of the shore below.

She moves to the chest next. It contains more folded blankets. She re-rolls them to create a space in the middle, with a mental thanks to the resident interior decorator for cost-saving on the furniture: the chest is cobbled together from rough, poorly fitted planks and looks well-ventilated. Margo spreads the blanket halfway across her little fort, then quickly walks around the room, extinguishing all the wall sconces. Once the room is dark, she climbs into her new hiding place and pulls the lid closed, careful not to jostle the blanket that conceals her. The little nook has the added merit of being warm and cozy — if a little stuffy and with a distinct smell of sheep. She spreads the blanket as best she can to create the illusion of a flat surface. And then Margo settles in to wait.

It's a long and uncomfortable wait. Her muscles ache from maintaining her folded position, and yet she almost nods off. She pinches herself to stay awake. Unwanted thoughts keep creeping in, and Margo distracts herself the best she can by recreating a mental map of the castle. The kitchens should be on the first floor, and she theorizes that they might have a servants' entrance, as well as some equivalent of a loading dock.

Margo is so absorbed by her topographic ruminations that she almost misses the click of the lock. And then there is a worried exclamation, quick footsteps running to where the window is, then back again, and, finally, a high-pitched scream. "Grand Enchanter! The prisoner is gone!"

Margo stills, barely daring to breathe. Finally, more footsteps come pounding on the stones.

"How is this possible?" That's Fiona, a combination of incredulous and peeved.

"You idiot!" Generic Goon spits out furiously. "You did not secure her?"

"She was barely conscious when we left her! She couldn't even walk!"

The sounds of rummaging, of furniture being pushed. "I smell Andraste's Ashes. No one told us she was an alchemist." That would be Matilde, and if Margo isn't mistaken there is an edge of spiteful amusement to the woman's tone. Margo decides that she sort of likes that one.

"She won't survive in that water for long. If you think the magister will let this mistake slide, mage, think again. I do not envy your fate."

"She couldn't have swum far. It may not be too late."

When the sounds of the retreating stampede fade, Margo counts to twenty and then pushes the lid open. If they left someone to guard the room, she is screwed.

She climbs out of the chest. The room is empty. Margo grabs a discarded rag from the alchemy table and fashions a kerchief that hides her hair, since the blond plait is one of her more distinctive features. Then she gathers several blankets into a large wad — large enough that she can conceal her face behind it while carrying it in her arms. The door gapes open invitingly. Margo takes a steadying breath.

*Ta-ta, fuckers.*

And with that, she walks out into the hallway.

\*Translation: "I think she fell asleep"

This chapter was brought to you by the "girl in the tower" trope, and the "75-kg petty thief wants to escape from a third-story jail window" physics problem.

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Thus ends the Redcliffe arc. Subsequent chapters will be posted as the edits/rewrites become ready.

On the Road

Chapter Summary

In which Margo finally escapes Redcliffe, and meets friends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The hallways feel endless. Margo adapts her gait to reflect the harried scurrying of the elven servants she has seen in Haven. The performance isn't a stretch: once the elation of her successful escape from the room wears off, the terror kicks in with a vengeance, adrenaline propelling her down the murky corridors. She hunches over her oversized bundle of fake "laundry," trying to take as little space as possible. By sheer luck, she locates the servants' stairs — a winding, narrow staircase, the steps worn to a slippery sheen with what is likely centuries of foot traffic. She hurries down, hoping she won't slip and break her neck. Now, that would be an ironic way to go, all things considered.

Two floors down, with no hitches. On the third landing, a contingent of mercs trots by. Margo hugs the wall with muttered apologies. They pay her absolutely no mind as they march off on whatever important business they've been entrusted with. Once they are out of view, she resumes her progress. Finally, heart hammering at breakneck speed, she makes it to the ground floor and comes to a stop at the base of the stairs. She hesitates. Left or right? In a moment of inspiration, Margo sniffs the air. If the heavy smell of cooked cabbage is anything to go by, the kitchens are somewhere to the right. She lets her nose guide her, with a vague prayer that the smell doesn't index anything more nefarious than uninspired cooking. Do demons smell like cooked cabbage? Cyanide, after all, does sometimes smell like bitter almonds.

There are no demons or questionable rituals at the other end of the smell — just a vast, windowless kitchen, humid, hot, and illuminated by the fires burning in two large hearths. A monstrous cauldron hangs from blackened metal hooks over one of the fires. The breads and cheeses spread over a wooden counter look like their expiry date is starting to get shrouded in the mysts of time. The entire space is in disarray — simultaneously understocked and messy, as if no one has been managing it properly in weeks. At one end of the counter an elven woman is disassembling a carcass with the help of a large cleaver and an unending string of muttered obscenities. Margo freezes. The thin red-head looks familiar. She recognizes the cook from the Gull and Lantern.

Elandra, that was the name.

The woman looks up, spots Margo, drops her cleaver on the table with a weighty thud, and quickly bustles over, wiping the blood from her hands on her apron. Judging by a complete absence of surprise on the elf's face, Margo decides that somehow her arrival was not unexpected.

"Ah, good," the redhead nods approvingly. "Saved me some trouble there, lass." When Margo just blinks, Elandra grabs her by the elbow and drags her in the direction of an unobtrusive back door. "Well, don't just stand there catching flies. Come, now."

A narrow utility space — likely the castle's main pantry before Alexius's hostile takeover disrupted the supply lines that kept it well-stocked — sports an assortment of shelves filled with

scant food supplies. The pile of potatoes in a corner hasn't just sprouted — it's starting to look alarmingly tentacled, and quite possibly sentient. Elandra shuts the door behind them, picks up the wad of blankets Margo is still clutching, and dumps them unceremoniously into a nearby barrel.

"Gave them quite the runaround, didn't you?" the cook — who is clearly more than a cook — chuckles, before scrutinizing Margo with a critical squint. "Oh, good. You found the outfit I left you. Didn't have one in your size on such short notice, 'm'afraid. It's from one of the keep's former chambermaids, may she rest peacefully at Andraste's side."

"Wait," Margo finally manages. "You put the clothes in the drawer? Are you... here to help me?"

Elandra huffs impatiently. "Don't be silly, lass, 'course I'm here to help you. That's what we Friends do, isn't it? We've had everything in place for a day now — I was just waiting for the right time to fetch you. Looks like you made your own way out, though. Not one to sit about, heh?"

With another vaguely approving nod, Elandra leaves Margo planted in the middle of the pantry, walks over to a large cupboard at the other end of the room, flings its doors open, and, with another muttered curse, yanks on some unseen lever.

"Finicky ol' thing never works quite right from this side." A hidden mechanism groans in disapproval, and then Margo spots the back panel sliding to the right with a quiet squeak and a cloud of dust.

"Jenny! Come, girl. We're ready."

The little girl from the tavern pokes out her head through the opening, blue eyes sparkling with mischief. She graces Margo with a wicked grin — the spitting image of her father's. The kid looks dusty, sooty, and thoroughly pleased with herself.

"'S'all ready, mama!"

"She's a Red Jenny?!" Margo finally manages.

The elven woman wrinkles her freckled nose. "Well, she's a Jenny. And she's red, alright. But no. Not yet anyway. Though she's got a good head for it, she does. She'll be taking over when she comes of age." There is pride in Elandra's voice. "And I can finally retire to bake pies."

Margo cocks her head in puzzlement. "Wait. How did you know to be so... prepared? How long has Jenny been in the tunnel?"

"Just the half-hour." Elandra smirks. "There are only two ways out of that room — out the window, or through the door. You don't strike me as stupid, so I figured I'd get ready, in case I was right about which way you'd leave. Better than scraping you off the rocks. Less messy, anyhow."

Elandra picks up a backpack from one of the shelves and thrusts it into Margo's arms "That's your stuff. Couldn't get your lute, but most of your other things should be in here. What's with all the books, lass?"

"I read a lot?" Margo grins sheepishly.

"Well, better you lugging all that around than me. My back's not what it used to be. Now. Tunnel's going to take you to the old mill — or what's left of it." At Margo's worried look, Elandra chortles. "Don't worry. Sera will be right there to meet you. We go way back, she and I. Put a thousands locks on it, and still that girl could swipe 'bout anything right from under some uppity noble's

sneezer. You're in good hands now. Mind you, make haste. They'll savvy up to you not being in the lake eventually."

So. Sera hasn't abandoned her, at least. On impulse, Margo throws her arms around the elven woman. Elandra's return hug is brusque and efficient. "Andraste guide you, sister."

"C'mooooon! Before the spiders are back." That's the kid, bouncing up and down impatiently on the other side of the opening. Margo slings her backpack over her shoulders, and, with a last thankful look at Elandra, crawls into the tunnel, trying not to trip over her skirt in the process.

And Jan abandoned this woman? Sure, it isn't considered proper to think ill of the dead, but Margo decides that "boneheaded idiot" in this case is a value-neutral factual description.

Jenny's warnings about spiders notwithstanding, the tunnel looks suspiciously well-traveled. Smokeless torches provide illumination at regular intervals. Every five hundred yards they pass a small alcove in the wall. At Margo's curious look, the kid grins, stops next to one of the little openings, and lifts a clay jar covered with a folded cheese cloth.

"I've been keeping these stocked since I was five," she announces. "There's water and medicines. We leave some food in there too, but you gotta seal it, cuz the rats will get it otherwise. Spiders, too, though they just make a mess of it. You thirsty?"

Margo nods gratefully and accepts the proffered water, gulping down the liquid in long greedy swallows. Even at room temperature it retains a mineral aftertaste — and just the faintest trace of elfroot. Thirst slated, Margo returns the jug to its alcove, and Jenny resumes her quick progression down the tunnel. It's all Margo can do to keep up with the kid.

"So, you knew my dad?" the girl asks suddenly. She doesn't slow down or look at Margo.

After a brief hesitation, Margo responds with a cautious, "I did."

"Auntie Sera said he was around the 'Quisition, but then he got himself killed. Said you were there for it." Jenny stops, turns around, and fixes Margo with a suspicious gaze. "Was he brave about it, at least?"

Margo hesitates. This is not a child looking for coddling or saccharine euphemisms. "He was. In fact, he saved a lot of lives," she nods solemnly.

Jenny squints dubiously. "Mamma's brave too," she offers finally, with the edge of a nascent challenge, as if courage were a zero sum game and there might not be enough to go around.

"She most certainly is. So that means you might be doubly brave, because you got it from both sides."

The kid mulls this over. "Duh," she finally confirms, then turns around and resumes her skipping down the tunnel.

It takes them about twenty minutes to arrive at a cul-de-sac with a crude wooden ladder mounted into the wall. Margo looks up. The passage extends vertically like the shaft of a well. At the very top she spots the faint outline of a trapdoor.

“Wait here,” Jenny orders, before clambering up the ladder with the agility of a squirrel. Margo watches her progress with an anxious little hitch in her belly — she half-expects the kid to slip on the rickety rungs. But Jenny is nothing if not sure-footed, and soon enough the trapdoor yawns into a bright rectangle of blue skies and white fluffy clouds. The kid hoists herself up over the lip of the opening and disappears into the glare with an, “All clear! Come on up!”

Margo begins her ascent, feeling as old and creaky as the ladder.

Closer to the surface, a wave of warm, grassy air greets her, and Margo’s chest tightens with the feeling of sudden, buoyant joy. She does her best to quash the giddiness before it overwhelms her. Or before she jinxes something.

And then a pair of hands grab the shoulder straps of her pack, and she is yanked out of the earth like a recalcitrant carrot.

She practically collapses on top of Sera.

“Oof! Watch it, Spindly.”

“Spindly?”

“Yeah, you know. All short and sticklike and stuff. I guess it’s fine, lots of us have that look, yeah?”

Margo blinks. “Elves, you mean?”

“Well, yeah, elves. Who’d you think I was talking about, Qunari? Guess I’m taller, though. And, ugh, Solas too. Now, there’s a shite thought. Though Elfy loses height from keeping his head all the way up his arse.” Sera, now seated cross-legged on a round patch of grass in the center of the circular ruin, laughs maniacally. “But not as spindly as Ellie. That one could never keep any weight on, worse than you. Jenny, if you and your mamma need to get out of this stupid tower...castle...towstle thingy, you know where to go, yeah?”

“Don’t worry, Auntie Sera. We’re gonna be fine.” The kid grins. “We always are.”

Jenny disappears through the trapdoor with a saucy little wave, like the world’s jauntiest gopher.

Sera gives Margo a quick appraising look. “You ready to get outa here?”

“More than I can express,” Margo nods.

“Fancy talker, but you’re all right. *People* people. Better change the clothes, ‘cause skirt, shite for running. Brought your armor.” Sera tosses Margo a pack, then proceeds to line up little bottles of glittery black dust in front of her. “So, plan, yeah? Going to sneak past the big green hole, then off-road through the hills.”

“Is that a good idea?” Margo asks, unlacing her bodice and peeling off the sweat-soaked tunic with a relieved sigh. The one Sera hands her smells of lye soap and sunlight. Margo makes quick work of the chest bandages before pulling the fresh tunic on. At the sight of her old jacket, she practically bounces up and down.

Still, she’d kill for a proper bath. But glass half-full and all that.

“Friggin no, it ain’t, but that’s why we’re showering. And before you get your knickers in a twist, no debt, yeah? Unless Adan doesn’t pay me back. Then I’ll let you shake it out of him, just so I can

watch.”

“Deal. Do we have a contingency plan? In case the demons at the rift aren’t impressed with our sneaking?” Margo steps out of the skirt next. Her leather leggings and greaves have been cleaned as well. She could kiss Sera.

“We run?” the elf suggests. “Got your boots over there. Oh, and that balding chap and his niece — or whatever — you all rescued, left a little present for you. Good for bard types, he said. Nicked it from that Lexis pillock before they legged it outa Redcliffe. Left your old daggers, though, sorry. They stink.”

Sera hands Margo a long leather sheath. The hilt that sticks out of it is made of a polished dark wood that appears to glow with its own reddish radiance. Margo folds her fingers around the handle. The wood is warm to the touch, and, despite its sheen, offers a frictionless grip. She pulls the dagger out of its sheath and draws an awestruck breath. The material resembles hematite — only dark blue — and the blade is curved at a vicious angle, like a miniature scimitar.

“Think it has a name, but I forgot. Who comes up with these stupid names anyway? ‘Bleeder of Souls!’ ‘Audacity!’ ‘Andruil’s Left Toenail — the extra pointy one!’ Pish. What’s wrong with just ‘dagger’?”

“Thanks, Sera. That’s... quite the weapon. You sure you don’t want it? Because if not, then I think I shall call it ‘Molly’.” Margo’s announcement is greeted by another one of Sera’s maniacal cackles.

“See, that’s why I like you. You ready? ‘Cause this whole place is crawling with these Vinty prats in bathrobes, and I’d rather not waste my arrows.”

From her position straddling the warm stones at the top of the wall that surrounds Redcliffe village, Margo can see the entirety of the settlement. An unusually large crowd is loitering by the shore. Small crescent-shaped specks litter the calm waters of the lake — from what she can tell, the boats are mostly dinghies, with the occasional fisherman’s smack etching a line of ripples across the placid surface.

“That’s a lot of boats,” Margo comments quietly, matching her volume to the strange ambient whispers of the shadow powder.

“Looking for you,” Sera whispers back. “Should keep ’em busy, yeah? ‘Cause you’re not in there.”

They give the rift a wide berth, skittering along the edge of the cliff that brackets the town’s southern gate. Margo steals uneasy glances at the hell-yolk that pulses and wobbles beneath them. Its otherworldly chiming grates at her senses. Beyond the gossamer curves of its spatial distortion, strange shapes ripple and stretch, straining the flimsy membrane.

When the whispers begin to fade, Sera silently hands Margo another bottle of showder.

They keep to the cliffs, staying beneath the shelter of the statuesque firs for as long as the trees last. Margo occupies herself with assessing their similarity to Earth’s conifers. The firs look like classic *Abies alba*, but taller and narrower, with strobili that indicate the cypress family, judging by their shape. Margo snags a young shoot from a nearby branch, bites off the tender end, and chews thoughtfully. The fir tip tastes like juniper, but with an unfamiliar sweetness. Might be good for flavoring ale. She could start a new trend.

When the last of the conifers give way to leafy underbrush, Sera stops, selects a secluded little spot under what looks like a hawthorn shrub, and pulls a map from her pack.

“Dicey from here,” she mutters. “Everything crawling with Vints all the way to the Crossroads.” She taps the spot that presumably refers to the aforementioned settlement — though, for some reason, includes a drawing of an ass — with the knuckle of her forefinger. “They really didn’t want to lose those two mages. Makes you wonder what else that Brand fellow pilfered aside from the dagger, yeah? Going to get worse once they realize you’re not in the lake.”

“Sera?” Margo sits cross-legged in the ochre dust and leans over the elven archer’s map. She studiously avoids Sera’s gaze. “Why did you come to get me? I mean, the others didn’t, so... why did you?”

When the silence stretches beyond the edges of what might be considered comfortable, Margo looks up. Sera is glaring at her with an incredulous scowl.

“Because friends don’t abandon friends to crazy pants mages, you ninny. Oh!” The elf proceeds to rummage through her pockets and, at length, produces three crinkled pieces of folded paper. “Wanna read these, yeah? Not that I did, I didn’t! They each made me swear that I wouldn’t peek. Boring.”

Margo stares at the three missives in utter befuddlement, then folds them into her jacket pocket. If she doesn’t think about it, she’s OK.

“I’ll deal with them later. What do you want to do?”

“So, I know this guy... We’ll swing by and lay low for a bit, yeah? A day or two at most, and then it’s back to the ‘Quisition. Maybe pick something up for the cause while we’re there.”

“This guy — who is he, and how do we get there?” Margo asks. She wonders whether this might be a good time to tell Sera she’s not sure she can — or wants to — go back. But if she’s got a few days before they make return plans, perhaps the unpleasant conversation can wait a little longer.

“Crazier than a sack of nugs, but good people. You like honey, yeah?”

They encounter the skirmish by midday. From their vantage point at the top of the cliffs that bracket the path to the accursed town, Margo spies the small knot of fighters kicking up a cloud of brick-colored dust from the parched surface of the road.

Sera docks behind a boulder and readies her bow. “What’s this, then?” she mutters, nocking an arrow and training it on the group. Margo crouches next to her and peeks out. There are four Vints circling around a familiar figure. The fighter in the center has traded his lion-embossed breastplate for lighter leathers. He seems to be wielding dual blades. Margo’s mind obligingly identifies the one in his right hand as a rapier. The other one is a regular dagger. But the mop of sandy hair leaves little doubt as to the man’s identity.

So. Imshael fulfilled his part of the deal. Good to know.

“What’s he doing here?” Sera hisses.

“You’ve met Ser Asshat... I mean, de Chevin?” Margo whispers, eyes still trained on the circling fighters.

Before Sera has a chance to respond, one of the Vints decides to try his luck, and the entire group bursts into motion simultaneously. Margo watches de Chevin dance through them with stunning efficiency. His fighting style is an odd combination of pedantic and underhanded, his movements precise, as if he's performing for an audience, except that he apparently has no problem deploying all the dirty tricks in the book, complete with kneeing his opponents in the crotch, stabbing them in the eye, and using them as human shields.

As the knight busies himself with fighting off three swordsmen at once, a fourth Vint proceeds to sneak away. Margo watches in consternation as the stooped hooded fellow extracts a gigantic grimoire from under his robes — how that thing fits in there is anyone's guess — and begins to mutter something ominous. The earth beneath the other fighters' feet flashes with a circle of incandescent gibberish.

“Sera, can you...”

Sera releases her arrow in the direction of the mumbling Vint, but the bastard jerks his head and motions with his hand, and Sera's arrow is bogged down in a bluish barrier. It clatters to the ground ineffectually.

The next thing Margo sees is a giant ball of flames flying towards them with an incongruously unhurried casualness — like it's just dropping by to say hello. Sera quickly steps out of the way. Margo darts to the opposite side, drawing her new dagger, and, before she can think better of it, skids down the rocky slope and takes off towards the mage. Something angry and primal slithers up her arm from where her skin touches the dagger's handle to pool and pulse at the base of her skull. Vaguely, as if through a reddish fog, Margo considers the possibility that the weapon is enchanted — or that the wood has been soaked in an alchemical compound — but before she can give it a proper thought, the mage raises his staff and a wall of flame erupts two feet in front of her. Margo simply leaps over it, like one might over a bonfire in some summer solstice ritual. The heat laps at her legs, but she barely notices. Before the mage can weave another spell, Margo sidesteps around him — whatever the hell the dagger is doing, it seems to mobilize her body's instincts and training much more effectively than she ever could — and with one fluid motion, she sinks the blade into the mage's kidney, burying it to the hilt between his ribs.

Sera's next arrow pierces his trachea, finishing him off.

The red tint clears from her eyes, and Margo looks around in horror. What in the Void was that? Her attention is drawn to Ser Asshat, who has summarily dispatched two of his three opponents and is pulling his rapier from the twitching remains of the third. Margo quickly sheaths her new weapon. It feels alarmingly sentient. And it seems to be crooning in her head something that sounds suspiciously like, “*Oooh, stab stab stab stab.*” Also, she's pretty sure it's cackling gleefully.

“Down, Molly, that's a good girl,” she mutters, then releases the hilt, swings the sheath onto her back, and rubs her hand off on her thigh, in case there are residual alchemical compounds on her skin.

Ser Lancelot the Lethally Efficient turns to Margo with a scowl, although his expression is more troubled than hostile.

“You,” he comments. Ponders something. And then adds, “Appear to be alive.”

For a brief moment, Margo is tempted to shamle about with her arms outstretched and groan something about brains, just to see his reaction. She quickly thinks better of it. It is unlikely that Ser Asshat would appreciate the humor. On a more clear-headed day, Margo decides that this

overwhelming temptation to needle him should be considered more carefully, but for now she simply offers a mock bow. “Somehow, you always sound so surprised,” she offers cheerily.

They consider each other over the corpses.

“I had reason to think I would arrive too late.” De Chevin’s tone is guarded. Then the knight — who doesn’t look like a knight at all anymore, but like a particularly well-coiffed ruffian — turns to survey Sera’s exploration of their slain enemies’ pockets with a disapproving frown.

“Thought you were going with the Chargers?” Sera throws over her shoulder. “Oooh, look, two sovereigns. Dead rich git’s the best kinda git. Didn’t you say you were ‘honor bound to accompany the Tranquil’ something, something?”

“I said I was honor-bound to get him to safety. Your Qunari associate’s company appeared well-trained. A larger group makes for a less tempting target.”

“Doesn’t explain why you’re back here.” Sera yanks an amulet from the neck of another corpse before moving on to the rings.

“I...” Lancelot the Discomfited clears his throat and looks at Margo. “Had reason to think that you might need assistance.”

“That I need assistance? Or she does?” Sera favors the knight with a squinty-eyed look and a cocked eyebrow. “How’d the two of you get chummy, anyway?”

Margo watches Lancelot the Inexplicably Embarrassed fake his way through a cough and turn an alarming shade of pink. She frowns. Is this a Maile thing? Or is this an Imshael thing?

Sera’s grin is a little wicked. “Oh, well, that should get Elfy in a tizzy. Works for me.”

“It’s not...” De Chevin shakes his head and emits a disgusted grunt. “Forget it. I would prefer it if I could escort the two of you to Haven. You may require an extra sword arm in your travels — the roads are crawling with Tevinter mercenaries.”

Sera sniggers. “Sure, we can use a fancypants knight. Just don’t be a prat, yeah?” She straightens. “‘Cept, bees first, then Haven.”

Margo blinks. What bees?

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by the Friends of Red Jenny - who could be just about anyone you meet in here.

Next up: Beekeepers; a play on a famous character from Slavic folklore; reading letters.

Honey and Vinegar

Chapter Summary

In which Margo meets an odd beekeeper and reads three letters.

Chapter Notes

[Small rewrites and edits]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They arrive at the hut at dusk, after a long trek up a deserted mountain path — deserted, that is, if one ignores the goats who not only seem to have no fear of bipedal creatures but actively harass them for treats. “I’m gonna eat you for supper if you don’t quit it, Fluffy,” Sera threatens one especially persistent one. Behind Margo, de Chevin stifles what might be a chuckle.

The goat butts Sera’s hand with its nose and bleats. She swats at it ineffectually.

By the time they get to the grassy alpine meadow tucked away between the parallel crests of two ranges of foothills, the sunset has painted the sky in an unlikely shade of lavender, and Margo is practically collapsing from exhaustion. Her earlier euphoria at surviving the ordeal has corroded into apathetic bleakness. She walks silently, focusing on her footing.

Below them, partially hidden in a copse of craggy, birch-like trees, stands a hexagonal wooden hut with a grass roof. Margo squints in the twilight, trying to identify the small circular structures scattered along the hillside. From where they stand at the crest of the hill, a low buzz drifts on the wind. Apiaries, she concludes.

They follow a footpath down to the habitation and come to a stop in the middle of a small vegetable garden. A quick appraisal of the plants suggests that the owner — whoever or whatever it is — doesn’t seem to be particularly picky about where things decide to grow. Potatoes and carrots are interspersed with elfroot and spindleweed. Off to the side, Margo spots a cluster of oversized umbellifers, next to a spattering of bright red flowers which, in the gloaming, resemble glowing embers. The garden flutters and buzzes with pollinators of all stripes and colors.

“We’re here!” Sera announces, and strides over to the sturdy wooden door. She knocks.

“The question is, where exactly is ‘*here*’?” de Chevin mumbles under his breath as he comes to stand next to Margo. His eyes dart to her, and then he does a double-take, eyebrows drawn in a frown. “Are you... feeling well, my lady?”

“Fine,” Margo nods curtly. “Tired.”

Lancelot the Unconvinced clears his throat. “We must speak, you and I. After you’ve rested,” he adds hurriedly.

Margo simply inclines her head in acquiescence. The unpleasant conversations will just have to line up and wait for their turn.

The sound of shuffling footsteps confirms that the hut is inhabited. The door creaks open on a narrow crack of yellow light that slices across the lopsided stoop beneath the threshold.

“Who comes?” The raspy voice is as creaky as the door.

“It’s Sera. Remember me? Let us in, or we’ll eat all your carrots.”

A long pause is followed by some clanking noises, as if the hut’s occupant is fiddling with an unusually diverse array of locks and chains. And then the narrow strip of light widens to a full rectangle.

Margo decides that the man standing in the doorway can only be described as “a character” — though “personage” might do in a pinch. If Death could be personified, this guy would be it — all he is missing is a threadbare black robe and a scythe. Counter to such facile stereotypes, he opted for roughspun off-white shirt that reaches to his knees, a pair of burlap trousers of undecided color, and enormous felt boots. He is at least six foot five, his body distributed in a single vertical dimension. The head that tops this ensemble is adorned with long, stringy white locks. The old man’s gaunt, wrinkled face looks like it has been chiseled by someone with cubist predilections. The pale blue eyes, buried deep in purplish sockets, survey them with a keen — and not altogether friendly — intelligence.

“Sera, Sera,” he mumbles. “You come. You go. You bring friends. Like your own kitchen, yes? Here, come. Bad luck standing on threshold.”

Margo frowns. The accent seems... Nevarran? No. Something a little rougher, with rolled r-s, and hard h-s. In her own world’s mapping, it would fall somewhere between Slavic and Turkish. The man steps aside and turns away, gesturing them inside with a bony, liver-spotted hand.

The house is oddly shaped but, to Margo, achingly familiar. There’s the clay stove in the corner, with a pot of baked milk already turning towards its delicious shade of rosy gold. Jars of pickled vegetables occupy every available shelf. Bizarrely jovial doilies cover the surfaces not already taken over by the pickles. But the main occupant of the hut is honey. There is more honey than Margo has seen in her entire life. Winnie the Pooh would have an apoplectic fit.

The man points a long, gnarled digit towards a crude wooden table, with a carved bench on one side — its aesthetics vaguely Nordic — and a single throne-like chair on the other. The chair — or throne — has handrests stylized as lion’s paws. The back is a loose representation of a griffon. For some odd reason the chimeric creature is outfitted with a truly spectacular (and entirely human) bosom. Margo catches both de Chevin and Sera staring at it in uneasy fascination.

“You. Friends of Sera, yes? Good. Sit. Food ready. Drink ready. Welcome. I am Goran. You tell names, I tell rest, yes?”

Margo blinks but decides to follow Sera’s cues. The elf takes the middle seat on the bench, with Margo and de Chevin squeezing in on each side of her.

“We have to lay low. But it’s just for a day or two, yeah?”

Goran — if this is indeed the man’s real name — returns with a pot of stew and four wooden spoons. He doesn’t bother with bowls. Instead, he sets the pot in the center of the table, and lets the spoons clatter next to it. Sera reaches for one, so Margo decides to follow her example. When in

Rome... Their strange host flicks his wrist. From a nearby shelf a loaf of dark bread tumbles onto the linen tablecloth with a weighty thud. Somehow, the telekinesis doesn't surprise Margo one bit. Why not?

The last thing to materialize on the table is a large bottle of murky, honey-colored liquid and four ornate little glasses of frosted, gold-rimmed crystal.

"Stay?" Goran settles onto the throne and reaches for the bread, breaking off sizable chunks and handing them out in turn — first to Sera, then to Margo, then to de Chevin. "Hmm. Names first."

Margo shoots a quick look at Sera, but the elf just shrugs, then nods. "You better tell him. He's weird. He'll know anyway, so I don't know why he even asks."

Goran's pale eyes settle on Margo. He squints, then quickly turns to de Chevin.

"No, no. Young man first. You bring interesting ones, yes? Puzzles. Old Goran like puzzles."

"I am Michel de Chevin," the knight offers — to Margo's ear, a little defensively.

"Heh." The old man's gaze becomes distant, as if crusting over with frost. "Name. Name is key, yes? Borrow key, open door. Forget to return name, maybe. Think, 'Who knows?' Kill for it, hmm? Wear it for so long, think yours. Then — snatched away! Trade name for promise, keep honor. Worth it?" Goran smiles unpleasantly — one sharp yellow canine catches the firelight. "Nice young man. Stolen thing burns hole in pocket, yes? No need."

Ser Asshat blanches, but then his expression turns resigned. Margo files this observation away, for future reference.

Their host pivots his head slowly and looks at Margo. Shit. Aside from the fact that the guy is a dead-ringer for some kind of Theodosian interpretation of Koschei the Deathless, he also appears to be a seer. A linguistically peculiar one, to be sure, but a seer nonetheless.

"You, then. Fair maiden, or what is called? Name."

"Margo," Margo offers cautiously.

"Margo who?" their host demands sharply.

"Duvall," Margo adds after a brief hesitation.

Goran cocks his head to the side, then suddenly seems to lose interest and busies himself with the stew. "Eat. Cold soup — host angry."

They chew in slightly tense silence. Margo catches her companions' furtive glances on her, but she ignores the unspoken questions and focuses on the food.

While they eat, Goran uncorks the bottle and pours the mysterious liquid into four glasses. He distributes them, once again in the same order as before, taking the last one for himself.

"Toast now. Then puzzle."

"What's this one for, then?" Sera sniffs her drink. Apparently, this isn't the first time she's drinking with the odd beekeeper.

"Changes to come." Goran fixes Margo with his cold, piercing gaze. "Big changes. Need good friends, but how know, hmm?" He raises his glass. "Drink then. To good friends. Not so good

ones? Well. For worms, maybe.”

After a few moments, they all take the shot. Margo identifies the booze as an exceptionally strong mead.

“Now.” Goran the Deathless sets his glass in front of him. “Margo Duvalle. Duvalle... Father Orlesian? Hmm. No... Elf. Forget. Not work like that here. Hide one name in the other. Good trick, yes. Immortality recipe like this, old. Put life in needle, put needle in egg, put egg in duck, put duck in hare, put hare in ... herring? No. Won’t fit. Pike, maybe. Anyway, put all in chest, put chest on tree, put tree on island, hope nice young man not come steal, yes? Know that one?” Goran cackles, though his eyes retain their strange, frosty sheen. “Old tree, two branches. One here, one there. Same roots, hmm? Long ago, not so different. Now?” He huffs an unhappy kind of chuckle, and shakes his head. “Now, all different. Dried up there. Broken here. Few left.” He snaps to, his eyes clearing back to their keen, chilly focus. “Nice fair maiden. Stay with old Goran, maybe? Big help? No? Eh. Never stay. Always chasing. Princes, wolves, birds... Old Goran forgets much.” He seems to snap out of his strange trance, and claps his knees. “Time for bed. Tomorrow, work. Bees. Up with sun. Sleep here, sleep outside, where you find.”

The old man stands up with a whole lot more sprite than his age warrants and walks over to a shelf in the corner. He selects a small clay pot, opens its lid, and fishes around in it. He produces what appears to be a dill pickle, examines it critically, then releases it back to rejoin its fellows. And then he picks up a glass jar of honey, so dark it is almost black, and carries his odd culinary combination to the table.

He turns to Margo. “You. Nested doll. Head small, thoughts big, rattle rattle rattle. Keep Goran from sleeping, noisy things. Need honey. Ale, maybe. Pickles. Sleep outside, firepit out back. Morning wiser than evening, eh? You rest, sleep here. No funny business, no no. Old Goran has good hearing.”

Margo finds herself alone by the firepit, a pot of honey, a pitcher of ale, and a jar of pickles for company. The night is mild. A quiet breeze rustles through the birches above her. The starry sky is bottomless. She spots a few familiar constellation. She recalls that the one that looks like a connect-the-dots representation of a uterus is called Draconis.

She extracts the three letters from her pocket and sets them out in front of her. Bull’s, signed “*The IB*,” is a simple folded note, without seal or envelope. Dorian’s is secured with a seal, the imprint of a signet ring with interlaced *D* and *P* embossed in the red wax. Solas’s is folded in some complex yet modest origami, giving the illusion of a seamless square.

Margo takes a swig of ale and fishes for a pickle. If she’s going to do this, she might as well stress-eat her way through it. She reaches for Bull’s envelope first.

She opens it and reads the blocky scroll.

“*Blondie,*

Maraas shokra. Maraas kata. If you are reading this, then you understand the first principles. A broken sword is a hundred nails waiting to become. Sometimes, a hundred nails is a sword waiting to become. (Of course, sometimes it’s just a bunch of nails.) In the struggle, you emerge as your true form.

When you come back, swing by the tent before you talk to Red.

Until we speak again.

The Iron Bull.”

Margo takes a swig of ale. Her first impulse is to fling the paper into the fire and watch it disintegrate. Instead, she folds it up meticulously and tucks it between the pages of her journal.

She contemplates the remaining two letters. Her eyes drift out of focus, and she sits, thoughtless, listening to the hoots of some nocturnal creature as the fire dances and crackles over the logs.

Half a mug of ale and a pickle later, she reaches for Dorian’s.

“My Dear,

Terribly awkward to contemplate the thought that this might never reach you. But, being the incorrigible optimist that I am, I would rather imagine you safely out of Alexius’s clutches, preferably somewhere with excellent wine and easy access to heated baths. (You will be pleased to know that where we are currently this is most certainly not the case — poetic justice, I suppose.)

In either event, certainly preferable to contemplating the grim alternative, isn’t it?

I would have you know that you were the culprit of quite the altercation. After all, the truly wise man lets his enemies’ hands win his battles for him. That we did not do Alexius’s toil in his lieu was not the effect of any diplomatic acumen on the part of yours truly — much as I wish I could take the credit — but of sudden trouble brewing back at the home port.

I wish we could have come for you ourselves. I hope you can find it in your heart to consider Bull’s actions with some leniency. I advocated for telling him the truth about you in the hopes to sway him, but Solas fought me on this with the full force of his frosty ire and snide remarks, and I fear I desisted too quickly under the onslaught.

If I were the praying type, I would apply myself to asking some abstract and likely altogether absentee deity that Sera’s plans to extract you succeed. As I am not, I fear my petitions would only irritate. Know, however, that you are in my thoughts.

And last but not least — forgive me, my friend. We are, all three, in your debt.

(I am simply man enough to admit it.)

D.

PS: Please do return to Haven soon. My presence has been expressly requested, as was Solas’s. I would feel infinitely better about all this if I had someone to ‘collude’ with. These southerners are a terribly humorless bunch.”

Margo finds herself smiling despite herself. She folds Dorian’s letter carefully and sits with it between her fingers for a few minutes, her eyes fixed on the flames. Eventually, she tucks it away next to Bull’s missive.

There is only one letter left. Margo reaches for the ale and takes a long gulp, then settles the pot of honey into her lap. There. It’s not ice cream, but it’ll do. After a few sticky-sweet spoonfuls she sets the pot aside and picks up the square of paper.

It takes her an inordinate amount of time to unfold it — her fingers tremble in the most undignified way — but, finally, the note springs open.

~~"Vh Leth H Margo, I~~

Words are inadequate. To hope that this scrap of writing will undo what was wrought is as absurd as seeking to remedy a deluge with a ladle. And yet, this is precisely its intent.

~~If you are reading this,~~

The Qunari does not know, and thus made his decision in ignorance. Dorian sought to alter his course, but I feared the truth would only put you in greater danger.

~~If am I to If you were to-~~

Death at the hands of a friend is no less final, and yet I could not abide the thought. Ironic. He does not see this now, but he may yet.

~~I~~

No. Business, then. I would tell you what transpired. The rest I shall leave to your judgement. On the afternoon of our departure from Redcliffe castle, we received a message from Haven. We are forced to make haste — my presence is required, but even if we succeed in making time, it may prove insufficient. Dorian's return has been requested also, although the reasons behind the summons remained unstated.

I have my suspicions. We shall see if they are confirmed. There have been whispers in the Fade, but purpose blinds us, it would seem, and I ignored them for too long — at all our peril.

Should my theories prove correct, as one allied with the Inquisition, I must ask you for a favor you have no reason to bestow. Return. If the Herald is what I think she is, then your presence here is tied to her in a manner much more immediate than I had originally anticipated. In the days to come, understanding the full extent of this connection might prove pivotal. Dorian told me what the potential future you saw holds for the Herald. I would not wish this future on her. It is a horror, no less so if performed at the hands of allies.

As your friend (a lexical inadequacy, is it not?), I cannot but counsel for the opposite. I beg you, flee. Hide. Find passage to Rivain.

Wisdom guide you,

Yours.

S.

PS: Whichever course of action you select, I will wait for you in the Dreaming."

Margo folds the letter, tucks it away, hugs her knees, and rests her forehead on her forearms.

It would be easier if she could cry.

Her eyes remain dry.

This chapter was brought to you by a little folkloric Easter egg, namely Koschei the Deathless, who appears to have retired from kidnapping young brides and sitting on his pile of gold, and is now militarizing bees somewhere in Thedas (I'm of course not saying that Goran is actually Koschei, but that this is who served as a prototype for fleshing out Goran's character).

Next up: Margo finally has a much overdue Eureka moment, and has the (dis)pleasure of waking up to Michel de Chevin.

Uncomfortable Truths

Chapter Summary

In which Margo considers some uncomfortable discrepancies about her bald friend, and has the displeasure of interacting with a somewhat troubled knight in not so shining armor.

Chapter Notes

Minor edits.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Margo sleeps fitfully. The stars tumble into blackness like raindrops running down a dark glass pane and pool like water under her feet, thick and viscous and ever deeper, a river with no banks and no direction. Without the alchemical enhancer from the lichen, keeping the dream stable is like swimming against the current — quite literally. The first time, the vision devolves into an uncontrolled dream of drowning, where the river morphs into the lake next to Redcliffe. Below the surface, awful things lurk, brushing against her legs. She wrenches herself out of the nightmare with an inarticulate gasp.

She shivers, huddles deeper into her bedroll, and stares at the sky above until the last of the horror drifts off on the breeze.

She closes her eyes and tries again. The second time, she dreams of the clusterfuck future. Her footsteps bounce in broken echoes, running ahead of her down the castle's deserted hallways. She wanders aimlessly with nothing but a shaggy, mangy wolf with glowing red eyes for company. Not only does the damn thing pant with an asthmatic wheeze, but it stinks of wet dog like you wouldn't believe. She forces herself to wake from that particular unpleasantness as well. What is it with her and wolves?

The third time's the charm — sort of. Margo breathes out a relieved sigh at the familiar weeping willow, the lily pads, the tall summer grasses — until she turns around and gapes in consternation at the new addition to the shed.

The hut has sprung chicken legs.

Every time Margo tries to come near it, the house waddles away. When all attempts at a frontal assault fail, she switches tactics and tries a surreptitious approach. She pretends she's just wandering by, examining the flowers — feeling ridiculous the whole way through. The hut proceeds to scratch at the dirt with its oversized and alarmingly sharp talons and scoots away whenever she comes too close. After several failed experiments, Margo leaves it well enough alone. Eventually, the unaccommodating thing settles into a kind of somnolent torpor, occasionally pulling one leg or the other into a scaly little fist under its belly.

For lack of a better alternative, Margo lays down in the grass and, to occupy herself, arranges the

clouds above her into a swirling spiral. She thinks. What is the likelihood that she will survive if she were to return to Haven? Conversely, what is the likelihood of surviving if she does not? She tries to put herself in the spymaster's shoes. If she defects, Torquemada will likely assume that Margo compromised the Inquisition while under Alexius's "care" and will send someone after her to retaliate. If Torquemada doesn't, then Bull might, as a matter of principle. She found some Qunlat references in the Genitivi tome and translated the two unfamiliar phrases: "There is nothing to struggle against. Nothing has ended." Ambiguous. Either way, it is hard not to read his letter as a veiled order to return.

Dorian's missive reads to her as both an apology and a cautious warning.

Solas's... Well.

Margo forces herself to finally consider the pile of inconsistencies that surround the elf, and that she has, so far successfully, crammed under the blasted Persian rug. Solas, she has learned, is an apostate, a self-taught mage who has never been part of a Circle. From overheard conversations — most of them with Cassandra in the Fallow Mire — she gleaned a schematic sense of the elf's purported biography. With an emphasis on "schematic" — and on "purported." She might not know enough about the mechanics of learning magic in this world, but she would be an idiot to overlook the other aspects. What is the likelihood that a reclusive hermit should teach himself not only complex philosophical concepts, but the rhythms and social conventions of academic debate? Because, if she would just take a second to shelve her infatuation and examine their interactions objectively, she would notice the pattern. And, of course, it has been part of the attraction from the start, at least for her.

But therein lies the problem. In this particular regard, they are too well matched.

Margo sends the clouds to spiral in the opposite directions. Consider Exhibit A. Solas grasps alien concepts too easily. He transposes them too fluidly to his own knowledge. He finds equivalences and parallels — as if it were something he had been trained to do. Their philosophical "debates" — and, at the thought, Margo makes a concerted effort to ignore the memories of the more physical dimensions of their encounters — are the sort of dance that presumes that both partners know the steps. However different their epistemologies, Solas works to find a common denominator, just as she does — and this, in itself, should have been the biggest clue. It isn't just a matter of cognitive abilities, but one of cultivation: to think with and against others, to put one's thoughts into specific forms of speech requires training. It requires comrades. Fellow travelers. Guides and mentors. Like everything else, it requires practice. Practice unlikely to be available to someone who has steered clear of conventional forms of sociality for... how old is he, anyway? He has made claims to befriending spirits, of course. Do spirits have such a complex social organization that they have academic debates with each other? Margo frowns. The spirits she has encountered at the rifts certainly don't seem interested in discussing philosophy. But it is doubtless that there are complex members of their species — if species is a term that can be applied. Unpleasant as Cosmic Asshole is, he at least appears to be a sophisticated life form.

Still. There is the problem of class. Solas might not dress like it, but the elf carries himself like someone from a social elite: down to the clever flirting, more 18th century French courtier than ascetic recluse from some forgotten village. His sympathies might be with the downtrodden — and even that isn't entirely consistent, if she thinks about it — but his demeanor tells a different story about his own origins.

If he were human, the discrepancies would have easily fit into a rather romantic — if stereotypical — story about a nobleman hiding his origins, perhaps because of struggles over inheritance, or perhaps out of a revolutionary orientation. But in this case? No such social niche appears to exist

for elves in Thedas.

Not to mention the proverbial cherry on the cake. What did she ask the Solas construct in the hypothetical future? Margo stops the clouds from swirling and with a wave of her fingers makes them congregate into a heavy cumulous with a grey, rain-laden underbelly. “*What are you?*” He had taken the question differently from how she had meant it. At the time, she had not managed to focus on the dissonance — too distraught to pay much attention beyond the pain of seeing his emotional response to her, and too easily swayed by the dream logic and the heartbreak of his impending demise. So, what did he think she was asking? She wrestles herself from the soul-sucking vortex of recalling his last words and wrangles her mind into following a dispassionate, analytical track. If A, then B. He looked like he was about to come clean in some way. About something she hadn’t known about. And, based on the construct’s response, it didn’t appear that the confession — whatever it would have been — was rehearsed. An educated guess would suggest that, even as they became lovers, he had never shared the secret he had been about to reveal.

A drop of rain falls on her cheek. Margo quickly disaggregates the clouds back to their feathery state, before she ends up with a downpour. Why had she not asked these questions before? She takes a deep breath. Because of the ritual, of course. One of their earlier encounters in the Fade, where he taught her to identify him: it had created a kind of artificial certainty, an intuitive feeling of knowing the nature of him. It had bypassed logic, silenced the questions she should have been asking, and offered a false sense of intimacy. In her defense, she did not have enough context to realize how strange it was for a mage — even an elven mage — to transact with spirits. In fact, wasn’t their initial ill-fated experiment, where he had reconstructed Maile’s memories, derived from something he described as a type of funerary ritual for spirits? At the time, she hadn’t known that most cultures of Thedas — aside, perhaps, from the Avvar — do not consider spirits to be persons.

One does not, by and large, have funerary rites for entities that one does not endow with personhood. Which begs the obvious question: what makes Solas different?

This brings her to the other problem. The blasted nicknames. Consider Exhibit B. In dredging up Maile’s memories (of which a chunk is now missing once again, courtesy of Cosmic Asshole, since Margo can no longer recollect the face of Maile’s lover, but only the fact of their encounter, and the experience of Solas reconstructing it for her) the elf had referred to her as da’elgar. Little spirit. Much as Imshael is so fond of doing. Solas, of course, has cycled through a variety of other endearments since, but tends to default to “lethallan.” And yet, his explanation of the term’s meaning has little to do with how the word appears to be used in modern Elvhen.

Margo frowns. Whatever it signifies, it isn’t a reference to their shared Homo Elveticus status. There is always that trace of disappointment — or, perhaps, alienation — whenever he mentions other elves, whether they be urban or Dalish. It is always they . The Dalish. The city elves. But perhaps the biggest clue is Solas’s own translation. Kindred spirit.

Margo’s breath hitches, the sudden shock constricting her chest and numbing her lips. The dream wobbles, and she rushes to stabilize it, rerouting her attention to its textures until the vision stops fraying at the edges. What is the likelihood that he does not mean this metaphorically? That the heart of the statement isn’t “kindred” — which is what Margo had focused on, her reason clouded by whatever absurd schoolgirl crush she has somehow managed to develop — but the second part?

Spirit.

She almost arrived at this thought on prior occasions but always dismissed it before it could fully

take shape. It explains too many things. It explains, partially, Imshael, and their apparent awareness of each other. Consider Exhibit C — give or take. Solas does not seem to be terrified of Cosmic Asshole — only worried about its effects on Margo. And Cosmic Asshole, if their original encounter is anything to go by, appears to know a whole lot more about Solas than would seem fitting.

Margo forces herself to breathe — in the maelstrom of realizations, she is forgetting this otherwise useful activity. While he impersonated Solas for the first time, Imshael told her stories derived from memories encased in the Fade. Sure, the bastard tends to fish around her mind to flavor its intimidation tactics — but this stuff, Margo hadn't known about. Wherever it was getting it from, it wasn't from her.

And then, in addition to the more logical, easily graspable inconsistencies, there are the subtle warnings. Baba had offered cryptic comments almost every time the topic of the elf came up. Margo's alleged taste for bitter roots. The bizarre references to wolves. The allusions to fate. And then, the latest. What was it? "It is not the trickster's fault that the fool is trusting?"

With the sudden horror of the very axis of her existence being wrenched away from her, Margo realizes that she never gave any serious thought to what the apparitions of Baba actually are either, lulled as she was into her habitual dismissal of dream states as simply extensions of her own psyche. Dear unmerciful universe, but she has been unforgivably, pathetically stupid. On all accounts. Putting aside the fact that she got herself tangled up with a man she knows nothing about — and who, by all evidence gathered, is at least lying by omission about who or what he is — how did it not occur to her to question Baba's ontological status? Baba, after all — her baba — is dead. Has been dead for years. The relief of seeing her again should not have overshadowed the obvious. Not when there is no such thing as "just dreams" in her new world.

She grinds her teeth. It is the same problem as with Solas. Baba feels right. Authentic. Her identity self-evident in the very nature of her. It never occurred to Margo to dig deeper: how does she know? What, exactly, is the mechanism behind that recognition? And, of course, the answer should be clear as day. Occam's razor: same damn rules apply. She "knows" Baba in the same way that she "knows" Solas in the Fade. Has he not told her as much? What were his words, all those weeks ago, when he showed her how to differentiate him from Imshael? Perhaps because this is the Fade, the memory floats up, a perfect echo. "It is not part of normal interaction outside of the Fade, and I have never attempted it with someone who is not fully a spirit." The explanation he offered at the time was that it is something mages do commonly when transacting with spirits. A prevarication, in retrospect, since most mages, at least those indoctrinated by the Chantry, are terrified of spirits and associate them with possession. Brother Genitivi did not mince words on that particular topic. Some mages, such as the Dalish and apostates — and the Avvar, of course — might indeed, transact. But certainly not most.

Although that is not the crux of the issue. Margo begins to gather the clouds back into a swirling spiral. Why would a mage need to make itself known to a spirit? From her experiences with Imshael, spirits have no problem accessing such essential knowledge, and they do so unbidden easily enough. The directionality is wrong. Again, it had been there all along, in Solas's own words. This is how spirits make themselves known. How did she not realize this before?

Margo frowns, and lets go of the weather control. The clouds promptly reshape themselves into the outline of something that looks a whole lot like a howling wolf. And then morph once again. The next cloud formation jettisons its lupine impersonation in favor of something distinctly... well. Margo scowls at the sky. No, Monsieur Magritte, this is indeed not a pipe.

"You're not what we'd call subtle, are you?" she mumbles.

She takes hold of the misbehaving cloud cover and dissipates the giant phallus back into a spiral.

Focus. She was at spirits. The spirit hypothesis doesn't help her with explaining the apparent class discrepancy, nor does it give her any clue as to the mechanics of how such a thing would be possible in the first place. A body snatcher, like her? Or what the locals call "abomination?" How else would he cross over? Are spirits all, like Imshael, master imitators? No. She has to take something as axiomatic here — if she lets it all become empty performance, she will be one step away from howling at the moon in solipsistic paranoia. The Fade "fingerprint ID" that Solas left her with has actual efficacy. Otherwise, Imshael would have been able to replicate it, and the entire exercise would have been moot.

"Who in the Void are you?" she whispers at the sky.

And this brings her to the final question. Forget Solas — whatever he is — for a moment. Who in the everloving fuck is Baba?

All right. One damned thing at a time. Consider Exhibit D — or whatever letter she should be at by this point — namely the hut and its chicken legs. This is, originally, Baba's shed. And the legs — well, she knows where the damn legs come from. From the fairytales Baba told her and Jake when they were children. It is her dream. Margo squints at the clouds, which have by now adopted the likeness of a bearded man with little round glasses. She flips the vaporized Dr. Freud the bird. Not subtle indeed. Like normal dreams, the Fade borrows from her emotional and cognitive landscape, and there is a language to the borrowing.

The hut on chicken legs is where the apocryphal witch dwells.

Might as well just go and ask, then.

Margo forces herself to stand up, turns to the hut, and wags her finger at it. "I'm on to you, sneaky thing." The house shudders, as if it's ruffling imaginary feathers. Margo takes a deep breath. All right. Here goes nothing. She makes her voice carry. "Little hut, little hut!" she declaims, feeling utterly stupid. "Turn your back on the forest floor and turn to face me with your door. I want to sit and break some bread. I want to sleep and rest my head."

There. Something like that. Ritualistic fucking house.

The hut sort of careens to the side. Margo can almost hear an interrogative, "Bawk?" It takes a few tentative steps — to the right, then to the left. And then it kind of shrugs and scratches at the dirt.

Right. There is no forest.

"Oh, just turn and face me, you silly old thing," Margo huffs impatiently.

With this clearer set of directions at its disposal, the hut waddles over. The door swings open with a rusty squeak.

She steps in.

"Baba?"

The hut is empty.

With a jolt, the dream is wrenched from her. Margo opens her eyes with a start.

The first thing to come into focus is Ser Asshat. The fellow is crouched by her bedroll like some

Pre-Raphaelite knight impersonating a particularly malevolent Boschian imp. He is casually twirling a dagger in his fingers. And he is peering at her intently, his eyes a stark, icy blue in his pale face.

“Awake?” he asks.

“No,” Margo grunts with undisguised hostility.

Ser Asshat frowns, but collects himself quickly. “Do you have much experience fighting with enchanted weapons, my lady ‘Margo’?”

“Good morning to you, too,” Margo scowls in return. She sits up and takes one more look at the guy’s hands. Lancelot the World’s Most Unpleasant Alarm Clock is holding Molly. Shit. She notes that he is wearing a pair of leather gloves and is handling the weapon very carefully, almost gingerly. She also notes, a little belatedly, that he has tagged the auditory equivalent of scare quotes around her name.

“Not as such,” Margo retorts dryly and rubs her face with both hands, trying to readjust to the waking world. The thrice bedamned Ser Asshat woke her up just as she was considering the meaning of the hut’s emptiness. At least the rest of the dream remains vivid, and with a mental thanks to whatever entity might be receiving adulations on this not particularly fine morning, Margo commits her analysis to memory. Right. She has a new purpose, if she survives all the rest of the insanity. “Baba” first. And then “Solas” right after — speaking of dubious air quotes around purported claims to identity. All the other unpleasantness will just have to get in line and wait its turn. Maybe she’ll start issuing tickets.

As she muses over this, Ser Asshat returns the dagger to its sheath and hands it to her.

“The others are asleep still, and I would be grateful for a sparring partner this morning, if you would humor me. Allow me to show you a few basic moves. Not with this weapon, of course. We will use a practice blade.” He stands up.

Margo narrows her eyes at him. His words are flawlessly courteous, but there is an edge to his tone. There will be no dodging this.

“Let me get myself sorted, and then I will join you.”

Margo makes her way to the wooden outhouse first, then walks over to the well in the center of the courtyard. She lowers the bucket down until she hears a distant splash. De Chevin promptly joins her there and proceeds to twist the crank, saving her the labor of pulling up the water-laden pail. Margo isn’t sure whether this is chivalry or distrust. Once the bucket is within reach, he lifts it up and tilts it over Margo’s cupped hands. She goes through the motions of washing her hands and face. To say the water is brisk would be an understatement. After that, they trade, and Margo pours the water into his hands — after squashing the temptation to dump the bucket’s glacial contents over Ser Asshat’s head in retaliation for the utterly inappropriate wake-up call. Who in the Void does that?

This sorry excuse for hygiene completed, Margo follows the knight to a small patch of packed dirt at the back of the courtyard. She notices that he wears no armor, only an open-collared shirt and loose fitting trousers. Objectively speaking, he makes quite the sight, but Margo finds the knight’s good looks supremely irritating. De Chevin reminds her of the blond, square jawed standard issue asshole from a Nazi propaganda poster. There really is such a thing as too symmetrical.

“Shouldn’t we be armoring up?” she asks.

“No.” He takes off his gloves and sets them down on a nearby woodchopping block. “If you are intent on using such a weapon, you will want to fight at close quarters. It is easier to train without additional encumbrances.” He picks up two short wooden daggers from the same block of wood and hands one to her. Well, then. He’s been planning this, apparently.

“We will start with a single dagger, then add another one if we have the time.”

For the next half hour, Ser Lancelot the Purposeful seems earnestly focused on nothing more than sparring. The techniques he demonstrates — and which he insists on labeling with utterly ridiculous and overwrought names, like “*Bear Mauls the Wolves*” or “*Fennec Escapes the Mountain Lion*” — are a mixture of knife work and grappling.

“There are different types of enchantments. Your new weapon mobilizes your instincts,” he explains. Margo forces herself not to roll her eyes at the punctilious tone. Except, of course, the knight is efficient. She supposes she would be a fool to turn her nose up at the free training session. “As with regular dagger work, if your opponent has greater reach, you will need to shorten the distance. However, the magic in the blade may impede your ability to strategize. You must act fast.”

He runs Margo through drill after drill, each time getting her to deliberately step much closer than self-preservation would suggest and quickly exploit the available opening for a killing blow. And then, after she finally gets the hang of it, he crouches at the last moment, hooks his forearm under her knee, and sends her down into the dirt. Margo lands on her back, the breath rushing out of her lungs. Ser Asshat exploits this immediately and attempts to pin her down by straddling her. He pulls no punches, putting his entire weight on her hips. He lunges for the fake blade in her hand. With a brief mental thanks to Blackwall, who mercilessly ran her through the grappling routines, Margo twists sideways from under the knight before he can pin down her wrists, hooking her legs around him in a standard guard position, with her ankles crossed at the small of his back. By that point, Margo is in an utterly foul mood. Which is why she inches closer, using his lower back for leverage, and straightens her legs into a vise. Ser Lancelot the Inexplicably Blushing makes a bizarre rookie mistake, and, instead of leaning forward to weaken the hold, leans back in an instinctive attempt to loosen the pressure on his kidneys. And, of course, releases her wrist. Margo gives the area over his liver a nice, not altogether symbolic stab with her wooden blade.

“You have a punctured liver,” she announces. “What do you want to call this one? How about ‘*Little Ant Bites the Annoying Dung Beetle*’?”

There’s a flash of white teeth, and it takes Margo an inordinately long time to identify it as a smile. Previous to that, she hadn’t been sure that the expression was in Ser Asshat’s repertoire. His breath is coming fast, and Margo notes that his cheeks are pink. “I yield. I believe you can let go now.”

Margo promptly unhooks her legs, scoots back into a sitting position, and hands him the wooden blade, hilt first.

“Thank you for the training.” She narrows her eyes. “Now, what was this really about?”

Ser Lancelot the Suddenly Embarrassed sits on his haunches in front of her and twirls the fake dagger in his fingers. “I had to know whether your story about memory loss was true.”

“And this settled the matter for you how, exactly?”

“It matters not, now.” He lets out a slow breath. “I... will take your statement at face value. I suppose you would not recall that when last we met in Orlais, I was... unforgivably rude. Among other things, I had told you that you would not survive the year. When the demon began to wear

your face, I took this as confirmation.” The skin around his eyes crinkles with a smile. “I am pleased to see that I was mistaken.”

So. Imshael did not spill the beans about her new identity when he was visiting with the knight. Margo forces her expression to remain neutral — the better to offer a convenient canvas for yet another fellow’s wild, and inevitably erroneous, projections. And in the process, she tries to stuff the bitter loneliness that comes with it under the rug — except, at this point, there is no more room under there. She has yet to meet someone in her new world for whom she might just be Margo, without the added baggage of their expectations. She averts her eyes and stares down at the dirt.

“You weren’t wrong,” she says finally. Just one less deception. Is that so much to ask for? “The woman you knew, whomever she was, is dead. I am not her. I’m sorry.”

When no response follows, Margo forces herself to look up. De Chevin’s expression is a questionable cocktail of wistfulness, longing, and resignation. Margo tries not to groan. Andraste’s silky knickers, as Varric would have it, really, Maile?

“I know what it is to take on the name of another in an effort to forge a new life, my lady. Your origins do not matter. Your past... does not matter. Only your actions.” Lancelot the Inexplicably Wistful peers at Margo with an anxious expression, then leans towards her. “I owe you... a debt. From our first encounter. I will apply myself to settle it, but I shall respect your wishes, and it will remain mine to bear alone. But I do not believe that us meeting again is a matter of coincidence. Not when you and I now have the demon in common. What could it be but fate?” Before Margo gets the chance to reconsider whether dumping a bucket of water over the knight might be a helpful approach after all, de Chevin stands up and extends his hand to her. After a brief hesitation, Margo allows him to help her up, but instead of letting go of her hand, he pulls her a little closer, and fixes his eyes on hers.

“Come with me,” he blurts out. “Together, we can put an end to Imshael. I have gone down the path the demon has pushed you towards. I have taken his deals when things became desperate, or in an effort to outwit him. It only made matters worse. I vowed to make Thedas safe from him, but he keeps eluding me. Between the two of us, I am confident we could find a way to eliminate him.” There is a weird desperate little hitch to the knight’s tone.

Margo extracts her hand from Ser Asshat’s grip, and takes a small step back. “I have sworn my allegiance to the Inquisition,” she parries quickly. Whatever her own feelings about going back to Haven might be, she is not about to embark on a wild goose chase with Ser Lancelot the Suspiciously Eager. Especially since, by his own admission, the knight has been at this particular self-imposed task for about a year — with very little results to show for it. In principle, eliminating Imshael is an excellent idea. It doesn’t mean that this is the man for the job.

“Your organization is pursuing a worthy cause, but they have no real need of you. Is this not why you wished to leave your old life behind when we met? Why the bard’s life appealed?”

Margo watches him cautiously. De Chevin, aside from apparently having at least a passing acquaintance with her body’s previous occupant, is not entirely wrong in this. It fits with Margo’s own understanding of Maile — uncomfortable as the thought about their shared commonalities might be. She has inherited from the other woman more than her physique and her poor choices, but also the structural pressures and limited possibilities that bracketed her life and that she sought to escape. And, as much as Margo is loathe to admit it, the central thing that has shielded her from some of these structural pressures appears to be the Inquisition.

Well, there’s a shite thought, as Sera would have it.

“Hypothetically speaking,” she says, “where would you begin, anyway?”

De Chevin momentarily sports a look of such radiant hopefulness that for a second he looks almost charming. “There is someone I have been attempting to track down. It is what brought me to the Hinterlands, in fact. Back when we met, you had mentioned that you had some connection with the Dalish — a clan in the Free Marches, though I forget the name. Something with an L. The woman we would be looking for is Dalish as well. She... might be in search of a new clan.”

Before de Chevin can finish, an ear-splitting whistle pierces the air. They turn in the direction of the sound.

“Lazy guests, angry host,” Goran booms from the other side of the courtyard. “Breakfast, then bees. Hurry now, much work.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by the little hut on chicken legs.

Next up: departures and conversations in the Fade.

I am determined to get the rewrites finished before the end of the year. Arghh.

Dream Beings

Chapter Summary

In which the team obtains bee grenades, and Margo meets Solas in the Fade

Chapter Notes

very minimal rewrites on this one.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Breakfast consists of some unholy combination of porridge, potatoes, carrots, and lard. Once it's been ingested, they spend the first half of the day on the grumbling end of Goran's ire. Before he agrees to fulfill Sera's bizarre request of "bottling some angry bees," the old man has them gather honey and beeswax, haul water, and even weed his garden, all to the accompaniment of rather unflattering commentary whenever, in his estimations, their actions, words, or facial expressions "make bees shift."

In an attempt to distract their host from his grouching, Margo asks Goran whether he uses propolis. His face lights up with the slightly demented delight of the obsessed, and the next ten minutes are spent listening to an exposition on the wondrous properties of "bee glue." By the end of it, both Sera and Lancelot the Profoundly Not Interested cast dirty looks in Margo's general direction. Margo ignores them. The occasional friendly noise is all Goran the Deathless to launch onto another tangent on the medicinal properties of various bee products, all in all, Margo's morning is spent in rather pleasant (and instructive) listening.

After a noonday meal of honey-glazed root vegetables, Goran takes them uphill to a particularly large apiary built at a distance from the others. To Margo, the pitch of the buzz that surrounds it sounds distinctly unfriendly.

"These ones. No good for honey. Wrong bees, hmm?"

Margo, at the back of their little procession, stifles an inappropriate fit of hilarity.

"So we can we throw them, yeah? Bees to the face!" Sera cackles maniacally.

"Is this... ahem. A wise course of action?" de Chevin asks uneasily.

"Brilliant, innit? Uh-oh. Is the big fancypants chevalier scared of little bees? They're bugs, Knighty, not dragons."

"I would much prefer dragons," Lancelot the Reticent declares, casting his eyes in Margo's direction, clearly in the hopes of garnering support. Margo shrugs and does her best to keep a straight face. "Just... pretend you're a little black rain cloud," she advises sweetly.

"My lady?"

Margo bites on the inside of her cheek to keep the giggles muzzled. She notes that the old man's eyes sparkle with amusement, but he offers no commentary. Instead, he dispatches them to collect an assortment of plants from the hillside. Margo is tasked with harvesting a short, herbaceous creeper that she decides might be in the salvia genus — a kind of sage, but with a minty undertone. Goran, some thirty feet upwind from the apiary, busies himself with a large clay box outfitted with a set of impressive bellows.

Once the bee smoker is operational, Goran flicks his wrist, and a barrier spell flares to life around him.

“You. Sit here. Wait.” He lifts the wooden box where little glass vials are cradled in their dedicated nests of hay and proceeds towards the now much more somnolent swarm.

Miraculously, no one gets stung. Goran hands off the crate of bottled bees to Sera and sends Ser Asshat to shovel gravel at the back of the house. “Heh. Nice young man,” he comments, watching the knight retreat towards his new task. “Need relax. Make bees nervous. Like big steam pot. Huff, huff. Blow off some, maybe not explode. Shoveling good for that.” Goran squints at Margo with a sly expression. “Hmm. Or. Maybe you help. Nicer than shoveling, most time. Good deed?” He wags a set of white bushy eyebrows at her.

“Won't be left unpunished,” Margo retorts. That gets her a dry cackle.

During their next water break, Goran goes off to rummage in his house and returns with a jar of salve and a journal bound with some type of tree bark. “Bee glue toothpaste. Never toothache after that, no no. Old recipe. More recipes in book. Want?” He thrusts the salve and journal in Margo's direction.

“Want,” Margo nods emphatically.

“Wrote all down first. Easier now. Just put in dream, yes? Know that trick?”

Margo receives the gifts with profuse thanks. “Do you mean that you can store information in your dreams?” she asks. Now, that would certainly be a useful ability. She wouldn't have to lug all the books around.

Instead of an answer, Goran pats her on the head with his hand, gnarled and dry like an old tree branch.

“Such nice nested doll. Likes bees, bees like. Asks good questions. Listens to old Goran. Sure not stay? Big help.”

Margo offers a friendly smile and a shrug. Goran gestures at her to follow, and she trails after him to the little garden. He points his chin at the red flowers Margo had spotted the night before. “Weed a little, hmm? Embrium. Healing. Very good,” he comments, then busies himself with watering the carrots.

Margo scrutinizes the “embrium.” She'd bet good money that it's a type of orchid. She's only seen it in dried form — the live plant is large, with meaty leaves and flowers that seem to glow on their own: the small particles of pollen that surround the bloom in a cloud appear to reflect the light. Probably in order to lure whatever local pollinator might find such a thing appealing. After a brief hesitation, she plucks something that looks like wood sorrel from the foot of the plant and pops the clover-like leaf into her mouth. Judging by the sour taste, it is exactly what she thought it was.

Interesting. Another convergence? Or... an import?

“Goran? Where are you from?” Margo asks, her tone casual.

The old man pauses in his watering and pivots to her slowly, his movements suddenly utterly alien.

“Know much, grow old fast, yes?”

Margo stills. Her fingertips, still brushing against the tender leaves of the sorrel, tingle with sudden fear. The saying is entirely familiar — something that Baba used to throw at them irritably when, as small children, Margo and Jake asked too many whys.

“What if I’m willing to take the risk?” she tries, but the utterance comes out with an unpleasant warble.

Goran the Deathless shakes his head once. “No. This, not free. Honey. Pickles. Bee glue. Free. Name, first time, free. Stew, roof over head. Always free. Place knowledge? Heh. Place knowledge never free. Know place, know dream, know root, yes? Too dear for you. Not have trade for it. Yet.”

“What might you want as a trade?” Margo asks quietly. Because, for a brief, vertiginous moment, she can almost intuit the monumental contours of some formidable cosmic mechanism, a deep, unfathomable thing hidden beneath the apparent randomness and impossibilities of her circumstances. And, for that short, awful instant, no price is too high to pay for such knowledge.

Goran straightens and beams at her with the full radiance of his many wrinkles.

“Nice nested doll. Know not what asks. Broken? Then come. Tend bees. Weed garden. Heal, maybe. Until? Big changes. Work. Later, Goran here. Door open.”

And with that, the old man returns to his carrots and says little else.

It is close to dusk when they leave Goran’s hut, with the prototypes of the bee grenade distributed among them. Margo peers through the glass of her bee vial. The insects are pattering about drowsily. “No worry.” Goran had said. “Wake up when matter. Now. Want more? Send nice people. Trade for it.”

Margo decides that she would rather not imagine what Goran’s definition of “nice people” might be, when it’s all said and done.

They camp in a rocky canyon a two-day journey from Haven. Margo sits by Sera near the campfire, while Lancelot the Useful volunteers to bring up water for cooking from a nearby stream.

“Shite. Don’t like this,” Sera mutters over another fletching job.

“What don’t you like?”

“Three days, and nothing from the ‘Quisition. Last thing was from Leli, yeah? ‘Come back at once,’ and that’s friggin’ it. Sent a note to Varric, nothing. Beardie, too. Nothing. I’ve got a shite feeling about this.”

Margo shivers, and inches closer to the fire. The higher altitude has turned the nights much brisker

than in Goran's sheltered valley.

"Maybe the ravens are having a gathering again?"

Sera shakes her head. "Nah. Saw them go back and forth earlier."

"Anything you can get from the Jennies?"

"Too risky. Haven's small, yeah? Everyone's up each other's arses. 'Cept Leli. Leli's up everyone's arse."

The conversation is cut short by de Chevin's return, and they make dinner, a weirdly quiet mood settling over them.

Margo takes first watch and spends it in an anxious, fidgety wait.

It takes her a long time to fall asleep. Once she does, the embankment snaps into focus with eerie ease. As if in compensation for the chill of her waking reality, the weather of the dreamscape has taken a distinct turn for the warm and muggy. Margo walks quickly to the house, recites her summoning mantra before the damn hut tries to waddle off into the sunset, and enters.

She is entirely unsurprised to find its hypothetical host, once again, in absentia. Baba, it would seem, only shows up when she feels like it.

Margo rubs her face with both hands. If she is going to do this, she'd rather be in the open, so to speak. The hut is hot, the air stuffy with old botanical dust. She'd kill for lighter clothing. A dress, maybe.

As it turns out, the little house is in the business of wish fulfillment. Margo plucks the new garment from the back of a chair — once her eyes land on it, she has the creepy feeling that the simple summer dress has been hanging there all along, just waiting to be noticed. The fabric is a lovely but faded crepe de chine, a shade that's trying to decide between blue and light gray. The dress turns out to be a little loose on her — made for a human frame, she guesses. Even here, her avatar remains stubbornly elven. She hasn't thought about what this might mean.

A thing to ponder for another time. When she isn't about to do something stupid.

Margo walks to the river and sits on a large gnarled root, letting her bare feet sink into the gently swirling eddies of the current. She watches the water. At length, her mind drifts across the misty surface, the perpetual dusk of her dreamscape slowly softening the ragged edges of her thoughts. She is reasonably sure she could summon Baba. But it's an untested proposition. And the risk of receiving the wrong visitor feels like too big of a gamble.

That leaves her with the other, no less dubious, option.

"Solas," Margo says quietly. And waits. Somewhere in the distance, on the other bank, a crow cries. A frog leaps onto a boulder by her feet, then plops back into the water.

"Hello, lethallan."

Margo startles at the proximity of the sound and turns her head. The elf is sitting next to her, a bit up-root, his back propped against the rough silvery bark of the willow's trunk. His bare toes almost touch her hip. His only reaction to seeing her is an audible inhale, and even that response is quickly

smothered in expressionless opaqueness. Then he notices their surroundings, and his eyes widen. “Lethallan, what is this place? It is... remarkable.”

Margo shrugs, and turns back towards the water. It is somehow easier when she doesn’t have to face him. “What makes it remarkable to you? If it’s the chicken legs, then that wasn’t my direct doing.”

“The chicken...? Oh, I see.” Behind her, she hears a short, surprised laugh. “Well, that is most certainly... unusual. But no, I was not commenting on your choice of architecture. It is the lushness. Most people’s dreams engage only a single sense — typically, sight. From what I have seen of yours before, they tend to appeal to several senses. But this is beyond that. The scent of grass, the flowers, the gentle breeze. The heat! The sounds are some kind of insect? Bird?”

“Cicadas,” Margo nods, abstractly grateful that he chose to direct the conversation towards the dreamscape, and not towards rummaging in the hornets nest of recent events. Smart elf. “This isn’t quite a dream, Solas. More of a memory. Maybe that’s the difference.”

She still doesn’t turn to look at him, though she can feel his movements at her back. There is a soft splash. Solas wades through the shallow water with an expression of slightly indignant perplexity.

“This river mud is exceptionally...” he fishes for an epithet and appears to come up short.

“Squishy?” Margo supplies helpfully.

The elf’s lips quirk. “I was about to suggest ‘yielding,’ but ‘squishy’ does capture the phenomenon.”

He comes to stand in front of her, and, for a sharp, dizzying moment, Margo is struck by how strange he looks, how profoundly alien to this banal but heartachingly familiar pocket of her memory. Then the breeze sways the curtain of willow branches around them, sending a small, elongated leaf to flutter past his ear. It lands in the water and is swept away by the current. And just like that, Solas snaps into place, as if he had always been there.

“Fenor, this space, it is profoundly intimate to you, is it not?”

Margo nods once. “Roots of my roots.”

A frown creases his brow, and he cocks his head as if straining to hear a sound just beyond the edge of perception.

“Ah. So this is where you come to avoid Imshael. I would not have known to even look for such a place. It is no wonder I could not locate you at all.”

“Amund told me to create a sanctuary.” Margo pulls her feet out of the water and hugs her knees to her chest, careful to let the skirt of her dress tent over her legs. She widens the root a bit to make her perch less precarious. Solas, she notes, tracks her manipulations with narrow-eyed attention. “This place is... well, it is close to my heart, yes. But it is also a kind of non-place, if that makes sense.” She lets her chin rest on her knees. “Most of those for whom it mattered are gone. It offers little by way of collective memory. It has the advantage of not capturing anyone’s imagination. If I understand how the Fade works in this regard, it is unlikely that someone extraneous would wander in by accident.”

“I... see.” Solas’s eyes drift over the landscape with a look of sudden, poignant bereavement.

“Solas, indulge me in a chat, would you? Do we have the time?”

The elf glides back to the root and perches next to Margo, his shoulder brushing against hers. “Of course. This is still the Fade, fenor. Time is of little consequence here. Though we should conserve a few moments for... logistical matters, but this is a problem of attention rather than time elapsed. You should know what is happening in Haven, and I would have you tell me about Redcliffe, if you are willing. What do you wish to talk about?”

Margo releases her breath slowly, and fixes her eyes on the crisp outline of the purple mountains at the horizon.

“Settle something for me. The rifts in this thing you call the Veil pull spirits into the physical world, but alter them in the process. Is this correct?”

Next to her, Solas nods. “Yes. When thrust against its will into the Waking, a spirit becomes twisted, driven mad. Its purpose is corrupted, and thus, no longer able to know itself, it lashes out in senseless fury.”

“Is this the only way in which spirits can cross?”

There is a long pause.

“It is not. Some spirits are enslaved by mages, summoned to serve the petty needs of mortals. Others are curious. Or lonely. Or any other number of reasons that might propel them to seek experiences with the material world. Sometimes they possess physical beings, welding their own essence to their hosts. The Chantry calls such things abominations, although the range of these relationships is more complex than that.” Out of the corner of her eye, Margo notices that Solas shifts, uncomfortable. She widens the root under him into an approximation of a seat. “Ah. Thank you, fenor. It appears that this place responds only to you. But why this line of questioning?”

Well. This is it. Margo closes her eyes, letting her mind relax around the series of discursive moves she will need to execute to get the answers she wants.

“I find myself struck by the catastrophic scale of the Breach,” she says quietly, “and yet only one side of it seems to be on everyone’s mind. In Thedas, at least this part of it, Chantry doctrine seems remarkably good at refusing to consider the possibility that spirits are persons.” She pauses, contemplating her next words. “You see, it was sort of the opposite in my world. Many of our older traditions tend to personify very generously. Everything is a potential person, endowed with intent. Animals, plants. Places. Spirits, of course.”

“Your world had spirits?” Solas asks, surprise and a hopeful sort of curiosity in his voice.

Margo shrugs. “A matter of epistemological disagreement, as I may have mentioned. We do not encounter them as you do. But, historically, many of our cultures assumed they were there, quietly walking among us. Our myths are full of stories about these sorts of entities. We tell them to our kids, until it’s time for them to grow up and find out that none of it exists. We recast it as ‘metaphor.’”

Margo startles, because, suddenly, she feels the soft brush of a finger along her cheekbone, the touch light as a feather.

“You are saddened, fenor.”

Her eyes dart to the elf. “Ambivalently nostalgic.”

“I would enjoy hearing more of your world’s mythology when the mood strikes you, if it would help.”

Margo nods. “I’ll be happy to share whatever I remember next time there is a quiet moment. I strongly suspect you might get a kick out of the Greeks in particular. And maybe you can catch me up to speed on your world’s creation myths. I still don’t quite understand what darkspawn are. Anyway, that’s not what I wanted to discuss, at least not for the moment. Closing the Breach won’t just save physical beings, it will safeguard spirits as well, will it not?”

Solas gives her a long, inscrutable look. Margo notes that he is almost too still.

“Not many would care about such things,” he says finally.

“I do not have the ideological or religious commitments that would prevent me from trying to account for all the potential casualties,” Margo shrugs. “It is no merit of my own, simply the benefit of profound difference.” She exhales. “You mentioned that spirits die, in a way. Once they are pulled through and twisted from their purpose, is that a kind of death?”

Solas nods. “If one thinks of death as the dissolution of the experience of being oneself. Yes. Certainly.”

Margo draws a steady breath. “But the outcome is not always negative, is it? By all evidence gathered, you seem to be fine.” She lets her eyes drift to the sky above the mountains and keeps her tone conversational. “If I were to hypothesize, I would say there are three possible explanations for why that might be: you came through before whatever cataclysm caused the Breach; you were not pulled here against your will; or you are, like me, possessing a preexisting body, and this somehow serves to prevent nefarious alterations to your essence. Or perhaps a combination.”

The silence that follows is deafening. Even the cicadas grow quiet.

“What are you saying, lethallan?”

Margo turns. Solas’s face reminds her of a mortuary mask in its absolute, deathly fixity. And yet, underneath the placid surface, storms roil.

“I think you are, initially, a spirit,” Margo says. “Or something like it. One that, somehow, has become embodied.”

For an eternity, Solas says nothing. His eyes search her face, and then roam over the dreamscape. Immobile as he is, there is something of the caged animal in his motionless tension.

“And why would you believe that such a thing is even possible?”

“Why not? I told you, from the perspective of the collective history of my people, this is a common concept. Our worlds could not be further apart in some ways, and yet I would be a shitty historian to ignore the convergences. Besides, I know something connects my world to yours, aside from the apparent transfer of botanical information. And, from there, if magic is real, if spirits are real — somewhere, somehow — then, as an intellectual exercise, I could consider the mythologies of my people as more than allegories. From such stories, ‘spirits,’ or whatever you want to call non-physical persons, used to cross over all the time.” Margo looks up at the elf. There is a strange, banked intensity beneath the perfect stillness of Solas’s face, but his eyes lock with hers, and Margo forces herself to look back at the water before she loses her train of thought or her determination to see this through. “According to our stories — our collective memories, if you will — spirits walked among us. Alternated between our skin and theirs. Shared our food. Fought with us. Sometimes tricked us, sometimes helped us. Sought to mate with us, of course — because why wouldn’t they want to? We have a pretty high opinion of ourselves in that regard.” Margo casts Solas a sly look and winks. It’s subtle, but for a second he seems utterly scandalized, and then his

cheeks color ever so slightly. “Anyway. You asked about why I think such a thing is possible, though I’m sure you didn’t bargain for this particular intellectual tangent.”

“Do not be so certain of that, fenor.” His voice takes on a strange, velvety quality, a sharp edge hidden beneath. “Although you are correct that I would not ‘bargain’ over your intellectual tangents. But I am curious about something, if you do not mind. You speak of this as if it is in the past. Did your world change in some manner?”

Margo shakes her head. “I don’t know. Again, this is just a conceptual exercise, intended to explain how I came to entertain the idea. But if you want me to run with it...”

“By all means.”

“The obvious difference is that we do not have the Fade. Although, if you dig deeper into folklore and some religious practices, it’s possible to come across a similar notion. But what we definitely don’t have is the Veil. In some senses, it’s the Veil that makes the Fade into its own separate entity, isn’t it? So that might have something to do with it. Although I don’t quite understand what the Veil is, so I suppose this is blind speculation.”

Solas remains quiet for a long time. “I doubt this is the reason,” he says finally. “But it is a fascinating question nonetheless. What would have happened over time had the Veil not been created to enact the separation?” She can’t quite read his tone. “But why would you think that I, specifically, might be a spirit?”

Margo shrugs. “I could walk you through my reasoning step by step — the discrepancies between your demeanor and your alleged background, your apparent love for the Fade, the way you talk about spirits in such different terms... But mostly, it’s the trick where you taught me to recognize you, and your explanation of it. I’m just curious whether it was an intentional or an accidental revelation, based on the fact that I lacked the background knowledge to connect the dots. Either way, it’s exhausting to always pretend you’re something you’re not.” She smiles, without much humor. “Speaking from personal experience, I could hardly blame you for slipping up.”

Solas turns to face her, and Margo forces herself not to recoil. There is, once again, that otherness to him, like a statue of some ancient demiurge carved of an arcane mineral, poised in waiting to become animate and wreak havoc.

“If you think me a spirit, fenor, why invite me here?” he asks slowly, his tone too casual. “Has your experience with spirits been so positive? If your suspicions proved correct, would such a gesture not be terribly naive?”

“I was trained not to generalize too readily. Just because Imshael is a bastard doesn’t mean all spirits are.”

“There must be more to it than that.” He peers at her, as if he is trying to pluck the thoughts hidden within. “Perhaps... If I were a spirit, what better demonstration of trust than an invitation to a space to which I would have no access otherwise? And thus, what better way to establish a social obligation of reciprocity. No less binding than if you had used a rope. I could hardly lie to you here. Was this your reasoning?”

Margo swallows, sudden fear prickling her spine. She knew going into it that she was gambling, so no point in crying foul at this stage. She glances at the elf’s face but can’t read his expression at all, beyond the barely contained intensity — though whether it is anger or something else she cannot tell.

Solas turns away, his face in profile all sharp angles. “Perhaps the Avvar’s moniker for you is not as much of an oddity as I originally thought. Little spider indeed.”

For a terrifying moment Margo wonders what would happen if she died in the Fade. Does the physical body die as well? Is it like brain death? Would she have time to wake herself up? She frowns and stares at the water, her jaw clenched. When she is finally able to speak, her voice is surprisingly steady. “I don’t believe you have ever actively lied to me, Solas. What’s more, you have offered your help and guidance without, seemingly, any strings attached. And you have kept my secrets. I already owe you a social obligation of reciprocity, and the trust is given freely, based on your actions towards me, and not on some kind of abstract ontological metric of what you might or might not be. But I don’t do well with discrepancies once I notice them. I have the sort of mind that will keep worrying at them, like a dog with a bone. I am unlikely to let this go.” She doesn’t bother trying to hide the sudden flare of anger. “If you want to interpret this as a cynical attempt at a power play, that’s your prerogative. If you decide that this is something you’re willing to kill over, that’s your prerogative. My goal is not entrapment, if that is what you’re concerned about.”

Solas huffs a short laugh. “Indeed not. You are far too subtle for that.”

“Not a compliment, I suspect.”

“Ah, but you would be so very wrong.” The quiet words send another shiver down her back — although, this time, not one of fear.

“Is my hypothesis correct?” Margo asks quickly. She might as well push this and see how far it will go. She’s come this far. The dreamscape stills, as if holding its breath. Even the river current slows to something sluggish and viscous.

“I fear the answer is not so simple,” Solas says after a long silence. Margo expects his tone to retain that hidden, jagged edge, but the words, when they come out, are simply sad.

When the elf says nothing else, Margo sighs quietly. “I suppose it rarely is.” Well. She didn’t exactly expect him to fess up. She ponders the new sense of distance between them, the strange, tense, frightening sharpness of it. In the grand scheme of things, better this than a mountain of bullshit. She lets her toes dip back into the water. Solas would likely not be able to access this particular dreamscape without an explicitly renewed invitation, if it came down to that. All right. She can do this. Don’t cut off the cat’s tail one itty bit at a time, as Baba liked to say.

“Solas, I would not wish to be with you under false pretenses. It would be a terrible idea, for both of us.”

She hears a soft inhale, barely audible.

“And under what pretenses would you wish to be with me, ma’nas?”

Margo frowns. Something about his utterance catches her ear — but not the grammatical inversion, or the sudden reappearance of the old endearment. The stresses seem to have landed in the wrong places, and there is a bizarre little hesitation after “with.”

“I didn’t mean...” she groans, stuck at that uncomfortable halfway point between sudden embarrassment and irritation. “I don’t mean it as a euphemism for sex, in case that’s what you think I’m saying. And I’m not using it as a bargaining chip. Or anything else. Not bargaining. Ugh...” Margo rubs her face with her hands, trying to will the blush away. Oh, but this is mortifying.

“If it reassures, sex is not where my mind went at first, fenor.” By the sound of it, he is speaking around a suppressed smile.

“What I meant is that, whatever our association, I am very likely to keep asking you questions you might not be pleased to answer.”

After what feels like an eternity, Solas surprises her by reaching for her hand. “May I?” he asks quietly.

Margo nods. His fingers lace through hers easily — a familiar, practiced pattern. His skin is oddly warm.

“I... Forgive me, fenor. My reaction was... unbecoming. But I cannot offer you a satisfying explanation now. And I will not lie to you. Would you accept the promise of a later conversation?”

Margo chuckles. “In some abstract and indefinite future?”

The pause stretches.

“No. Let us say, after the Breach is closed. If we both survive until then.”

She ponders this, and, at length, nods. “A formal promise. To answer my questions, truthfully. Once the Breach is closed.”

“Very well.” The elf’s fingers tighten around hers. “Consider the promise given.”

They sit quietly for a moment. In the distance, something howls.

“You appear to have finally warmed up,” Margo suddenly notes with a puzzled frown at their interlaced digits. She looks at the elf then, and is met with the ghost of a familiar, cheeky smile.

“You keep this place quite hot. It is a pleasant change from my current circumstances. Which brings me to an unrelated question. This dress... is it something you would have worn in your world?”

Margo frowns. “It is a little big on me these days. It would have been shorter normally.” She looks at Solas. His eyes dart up to meet hers awfully quickly. “I’m not entirely sure how to control the temperature — without the lichen, the dreaming seems to have a mind of its own. But if you’re overheating, feel free to go for a swim. Just,” she motions upriver, “don’t go that way. There used to be a sinkhole about fifteen yards from the shore. Not enough force to drown a good swimmer, but it’d give you a scare. Oh, and if there are long-haired ladies in the water with disproportionately large eyes telling you that they would like to tickle you, I strongly recommend not engaging.”

She expects some sort of clever repartee, but instead, Solas gives her a long, strange look.

“I will admit, it is a tempting offer. Long-haired ladies and whirlpools notwithstanding, I would enjoy seeing how you have animated the river beneath the surface. It makes for a rather complex problem.” He hesitates. “Would you truly not object?”

Margo laughs and gestures towards the water. “Be my guest. Take a dip. And let me know what you find out, I’m curious about this too, and I haven’t had a chance to test it yet.”

Another very odd look. Eventually, Solas turns his back to her, hesitates, and then pulls off his nondescript sweater in one quick, fluid movement. He tosses it on the root. Margo begins to turn

her head to give him some privacy, but her eyes snag on his skin — and, to be fair, it isn't just the bold, graceful lines of his shoulders and back tapering to narrow hips that capture her attention, though there is some of that as well. It's the scars. And not just that there are far too many of them for a cautious mage recluse: another confirmation that his story is at least partially fictive. This is someone who has seen his share of battle — over a number of years. But what rivets her gaze is the odd tracings — faint, silvery etchings that snake down from the nape, along the spine, and down to the lower back in a geometric pattern that she can't quite tear her eyes from. The scars are not entirely even — more pronounced in some areas, almost invisible in others. As if leftovers of something else, removed.

Margo frowns. Even when they traveled together, she never saw Solas bathe alongside her other companions — or get undressed in public. She always assumed that it was because relying on the built-in dry-cleaning spell made it unnecessary. It never occurred to her that there might be other reasons.

If he realizes she is watching, he gives no sign of it. He rolls up his trousers to just below the knee and glides across the shallows to where the riverbed dips abruptly. And, before Margo can puzzle out the meaning of his markings, he is off, crossing the placid surface in long, easy strokes.

For the next few minutes, Margo busies herself with the problem of trying to materialize a towel, some kind of atavistic hospitality reflex kicking in. The dream does not cooperate. All she manages is a dishrag of questionable quality.

She is so thoroughly absorbed in her task that when something cold and wet brushes her shoulder, Margo almost tumbles down from her perch. Solas steadies her with one hand at her back. Somehow, he snuck up.

“Ugh, you are cold as a frog!”

The elf's expression vacillates between scandalized and amused, then settles on the latter. “A frog, hmm? I have been compared to worse things. Just, please, fenor, while we do not fully understand the exact mechanism of this dream of yours, strive not to turn me into one.” He rests his forearms on the root next to Margo and looks up at her. “It is fascinating. There are two currents that you are replicating — one above, and one at a greater depth. It is what gives the river its texture. I was expecting an illusion, the mere imitation of movement, but the two currents are, in fact, of different temperatures.”

“I most definitely do not have the attention span, nor the necessary knowledge of physics, to model such a thing consciously,” Margo retorts, scowling at the damn towel. She passes it to Solas. “Here. Best I could do. I told you, this place has its own mind.”

“However you are doing it, I am grateful. This is a most welcome and unexpected reprieve.”

Solas straightens and takes the dish rag from her. If he has an opinion on the subject of the offending textile, it doesn't show. He is mere inches away now, but his back is once again to the river. There are scars on this side too, but fewer and fainter, and none of them exhibit that ornamental quality. Margo narrows her eyes. Solas, she is pretty sure, does very few things unintentionally. She'd bet good money he had meant for her to see them.

“Does the pretty pattern have a story?” Margo asks, with a tilt of her chin towards his back.

“Ah. You can see it. I suspected that might be the case.” He pauses, contemplating something. “Everything has a story, fenor. Frequently more than one, and most of them wrong.”

Margo laughs despite herself. “Spoken like a historian.”

Solas hangs the rag on the root and glides to stand in front of her. His expression is impish.

Margo squints at him. “I have the overwhelming suspicion you’re about to do something reprehensible.”

His hands settle on her knees.

“May I,” he asks, eyes fixed on hers. There’s heat in his gaze, but also a very suspiciously wicked sort of amusement.

“May you what, exactly? What are you up to?” Margo squeaks.

“Testing the waters.”

Before she can process this questionable statement, he pushes her knees apart and takes a step forward, his body suddenly flush against hers. To avoid tumbling off her perch, Margo instinctively hooks her legs around his hips. Solas leans in, his lips at her ear. She swallows. This is new. A whole lot of skin. She’s not entirely sure what to do with her hands. Where should she start? “Here, allow me to demonstrate,” he whispers and traces the sensitive shell of her ear with his tongue. Margo shudders violently. His hands travel slowly along her thighs, pushing up the fabric of her dress, trail over her hips, and then settle on her ass — and then, to Margo’s outraged, if belated, realization and irate “Don’t even think about it,” Solas lifts her easily, takes a few steps backwards towards the deeper part of the river bed, and dunks them both into the current. It’s bracingly cold. Margo curses a foul streak, desperately wishing for the water to be the temperature of a warm bath, and then gapes at the elf, who, by this point, is sporting an expression of such obnoxious self-satisfaction she actually attempts to kick him under the water. Entirely ineffectually, of course, since she is still tangled around him and held in place by a rather unapologetically firm grip.

“I am not a scientific instrument, fenor ! Keep at it, and you’ll be hopping home.”

“It would appear that my theory has proven correct. This pocket of the Fade responds to your desires, not to your directed thoughts. Interesting, is it not?”

Margo growls. “Shall we test it? I do wonder whether amphibian life will suit your complexion, Solas.”

“I am reasonably certain I am immune, but let us experiment. Focus your attention on me, and wish something. Let us see what the effects might be.”

Margo scowls, but she puts her arms around his neck in case he decides to let go and the current drags her downstream. Oh, she can see this one coming from a mile away. The accursed elf approaches flirting in the same way one might a game of chess.

It is her dream. She’ll be damned if she lets him have the last word on this one. Margo closes her eyes and tries to concentrate. It proves to be a mistake.

“Stop that, it’s cheating,” she gasps.

“Oh? Perhaps your wishing was too vague. Strive for something more specific.”

“What you are doing with your fingers would certainly qualify as specific, you arrogant ass,” Margo sputters. She feels more than hears his quiet chortle, and tries, entirely ineffectually, to at least get them to the shore. The dream does not comply.

It’s probably the annoyance of knowing she will likely get outmaneuvered — or, rather, the flustered feeling of being unreasonably fine with that — but, on impulse, Margo adopts a different strategy. She stretches with her mind not into her own dream, but into his. The feeling is akin to what happens when one tries to open one’s eyes while still in sleep paralysis. For a split second, before she is pushed like a cork out of water, she glimpses dark grey stone and the dim light of a dying torch and hears the faint echo of someone’s muffled crying. There are footsteps bouncing off the stones in the distance.

Solas tenses against her, utterly still now. She looks at him in horror, because, of course, the gray walls are familiar.

“Solas? What in the Void are you doing in Torquemada’s dungeons?”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by propolis, and in case you're wondering, yes, propolis toothpaste is an actual thing. You can even DIY it in a pinch.

Next up: What's happening in Haven (nothing good, of course)

Clouded Minds

Chapter Summary

In which Margo learns about the mess in Haven.

Chapter Notes

Minimal edits for this chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The shock of revelation — shared, Margo realizes, only incompletely, since its causes are distinct for each of them — has a sobering effect. She is the one to recover first: by the time she manages to disentangle herself and grips Solas by the wrist — the better to drag him ashore — he is still staring at her with a quizzical, worried, impatient frown.

“You are, as ever, full of surprises,” he finally states, but he no longer resists her tugging and wades after her willingly enough.

“How is it that I can see your waking reality through your dream?” Margo asks once they make it to the embankment.

“In the same manner, I presume, that you can reach into my dream in the first place. The rest is simply training on my part. One learns to sleep with one eye open.”

“Training, or natural talent?” For all she knows, the elf — or whatever he is, since the issue remains unsettled — is capable of unihemispheric slow-wave sleep. Like dolphins.

He doesn’t offer an answer.

After the tepid water, the air feels unpleasantly brisk. The wet dress clings to Margo’s skin, and no amount of wishing seems to remedy the problem. When they level with their previous arboreal perch, Solas retrieves his sweater, but instead of pulling it on he throws it over her shoulders.

“You seem cold, fenor. Until you find a way to conjure dryer clothing.”

Margo casts him a grateful look. There is a little mischievous sparkle in his eyes, but it is quickly reset to neutral.

A few yards away from the chicken-legged architectural chimera, Margo whispers her hut-taming spell. The habitation shuffles from foot to foot but otherwise remains in place. She ascends the three rickety steps, her visitor in tow.

The hut decided to jettison the normal laws of physics in favor of a more spacious arrangement. Not only is the inside now distinctly larger than the outside, but the house has also availed itself of a functioning clay stove, a sturdy table and two chairs with embroidered cushions, and, somewhat predictably considering its presumed owner, an oversized mortar and pestle, large enough to pound

flour — or fly around in. It is tucked away into a far corner, as unobtrusively as such a device can manage. A bed, a desk, and an empty bookshelf have joined the ranks. And, not to be forgotten, a giant cast-iron cauldron on the stove.

Margo is so busy gawking at the new surroundings that it takes a moment to register that her clothes are dry.

“If I were to venture a theory, I would guess that this place is the dream’s focal point,” Solas muses, passing a hand over the now much lighter fabric of his trousers. Margo hands him his sweater, which he dons quickly. She gestures towards the table.

“You should know about Haven,” Solas offers as soon as they are seated.

Margo looks for a teakettle, recalls that her guest is insufferably picky in that department, and sheepishly petitions the hut for hot chocolate. When her attention is drawn back to the table, there are two clay cups of steaming, sweet-smelling liquid standing right at the center — by all appearances just waiting patiently to be noticed. She pushes one in Solas’s direction. He frowns at the mug and takes a tentative sniff. Margo waits expectantly. A sudden, surprised smile tugs at the corners of his lips, and Margo represses a triumphant “aha!” into an even less dignified snort as soon as she identifies the expression as one of recognition. There might yet be hope for this world if it has the theobroma cacao tree, or equivalent. She pulls the other cup towards herself.

“Are you really in Leliana’s dungeon?”

Solas nods, takes a sip, and sighs with something suspiciously close to satisfaction, and then his expression turns grave. He sets the mug down in front of him and wraps his fingers around it. “I am, though as a visitor, not as a resident. For now, at least.”

Margo quirks an eyebrow. “What sort of visitor to a dungeon takes the time to nap?”

“One whose duties retain him there for extended periods of time.”

She sighs. It’s got to be Evie. That’s the most logical explanation. “Who else is in there?”

Solas’s eyes grow stormy. “Aside from the Herald, whose state is most certainly not improved by her new quarters, there are two more: Varric, and a young man whom you have not met. His name is Cole. Although his presence in the dungeon is more courtesy on his part than any actual success in keeping him locked away.”

Shit. Not only did Torquemada go on an arrest spree — a turn of events that does not surprise Margo in the least — but she’s got Varric. Varric, who has by his own admission been on the business end of both Torquemada’s and the Seeker’s pointed questions. If the history of authoritarian regimes teaches one anything, it is that repeated arrests are a risk factor for untimely death. Margo forces herself to focus, pushing the panic below the surface, where it can flail ineffectually without interfering with her thinking. What do Varric and Evie have in common?

The obvious conclusion might as well be painted across her forehead in capital letters, because Solas nods once in confirmation. “Cole sought to help the Herald in her fight against the Envy demon that overtook the templar commander. The consequences of his intervention were... unexpected.”

Margo files away the existence of envy demons under the ever-expanding rubric of “inconceivable things to be dealt with at a later date” and forces her mind to focus on the more immediate problem. “I have a feeling that ‘unexpected’ is the understatement of the epoch. Leliana learned about Evie’s

past, didn't she?"

Solas takes another sip and leans back. His long fingers drum an impatient staccato rhythm against the coarse surface of the oak table. "In a manner of speaking. She remains astoundingly unconcerned about what exactly has been done to the child, though that is an aside. As I have mentioned, Cole sought to help the Herald. Cole is... unique. It is difficult to explain what he did to someone who is not adept in magic..."

Margo waves away his hedging with a quick gesture. "Try me."

"At your pleasure, fenor." He pauses, his eyes on her, a speculative expression on his face. Margo takes the opportunity to revisit her last words for any double entendre and promptly gives the elf the stink eye. It would seem that the colloquialism does not translate quite so innocently into whatever linguistic idiom he operates in. Solas resumes, entirely unperturbed, the ghost of a smile there, then gone. "All magic is derived from the Fade. I may have mentioned that the Herald's connection was practically nonexistent, though it appears that this is not the natural state of affairs, but rather the result of whatever has been done to her. Cole... Ah. Imagine a dam on a river..."

Margo nods vigorously before Solas has the chance to finish, allowing his metaphor to conjure another. "He did a bypass?"

Solas's expression is quizzical for a split second, but then it settles into understanding, and he inclines his head in confirmation.

"Precisely. He bypassed the blockage, creating a different route for the flow of magical energy."

"I'm sure that went over well."

"As well as you would expect. The Herald's magical propensities are as narrow as they are uncommon. The Circle mages the Inquisition has in its employ recoil from her in fear and incomprehension. The fact that her magic, however raw and wild, has likely saved the Templars and defeated Envy is beyond their capacity to grasp."

Margo pinches the bridge of her nose. "Slow down. Tell me the chronology. What actually happened, step by step?"

Solas taps his lips with his finger, then takes another sip of cocoa. "I fear this will be incomplete, fenor. I did not witness it myself. Cole's intervention revealed the Herald to be an untrained mage, but it must have destabilized the precarious balance between her latent powers, the mark, and what you so felicitously called the 'jinx vortex.' Upon their return from Therinfal, the Seeker, no doubt racked by guilt over her dissimulation, approached the other advisors with the revelation of the Herald's status, in the process inculcating Varric, you, and me as coconspirators. It could not have happened at a worse time. There is a Chantry delegation in Haven, lending support to local voices that would see the Inquisition disbanded and the Herald put on trial. The advisors scramble to play a game of appearances — one they will not win, I fear. Varric was taken to the dungeons that same night. I am for the time being simply followed by Leliana's people, and I was discouraged from attempting to leave. While my utility in keeping the Herald alive persists, I cannot be disposed of quite so quickly, I suppose. However, I can scarcely keep the power of the mark from killing her: whatever magic feeds the luck siphon interprets my efforts as hostile acts, causing constant bizarre mishaps."

With a truly spectacular effort, Margo manages to rearrange her expression into something more reasonable than stunned gaping. And then she bristles at the thrice-bedamned elf. "And when, pray tell, were you planning to tell me all of this?"

Solas has the decency to look mildly abashed. Until, that is, a bout of cheekiness purses his lips into a small, intimate smile. “I am certain the opportunity would have presented itself eventually. As I have mentioned, the Fade is a matter of sustained attention, rather than time.” His expression turns serious. “But you are forgoing the question most relevant to your own wellbeing. I must retract the favor I requested of you in my letter. Do not, under any circumstances, return to Haven.”

Margo wrinkles her nose in an expression of cosmic disgust. “Let me guess. Leliana will have me court-martialed.”

Oh. Her eyes widen in realization. “Agh! You tricky...” She ends the abbreviated sentence on an inarticulate growl for lack of a more pithy insult. “That’s why you were so forward. You figured you’d explain all this, and I’d stay away. Problem solved. Might as well have some fun!”

“I can always visit you in the Fade, if you allow it,” Solas comments innocently. “Geographic distance need not be an impediment.”

Margo springs from her chair, the anxiety propelling her into arbitrary movement. For lack of a better alternative, she begins to pace. “Leliana will find me anyway. There is the bigger problem. Can Evie still close the Breach?” She narrows her eyes suspiciously. This is the reason the sneaky bastard hinged his promise to answer her questions on that particular event, isn’t it?

“If we are exceptionally lucky.”

“Conniving ass. Fine. Why is Evie in the dungeon?”

Solas chuckles. “Mostly to appease collective fears. Among other things, it would seem that Lady Trevelyan is completely immune to the templars’ efforts at suppressing her magic. It is quite remarkable, in fact — I believe she rather enjoys it. Her own words on the subject were that it ‘clears her head.’”

Margo can’t help the smirk. She casts Solas a quick look. Their eyes lock briefly, something sharp and strange passing between them. She isn’t entirely certain she can identify the sentiment. An odd species of solidarity, recognizable despite its morphological distinction from its more familiar and easily domesticated brethren. “I have a feeling you’re not altogether displeased with that particular turn of events,” Margo ventures.

Solas quirks an eyebrow. “I can only imagine that this was quite the unpleasant surprise for the representatives of the Chantry. The Herald of Andraste, an untrained apostate, entirely immune to the purportedly holy power of the templar smite.”

“Someone will have to engage in impressive theodicean acrobatics to explain that one,” Margo grins, feeling vaguely vindicated on Evie’s behalf.

The smile Solas offers in return is very private, with a trenchant edge beneath the softness. She quickly turns away to find something innocuous to look at — and does her best to ignore the sudden and rather inopportune aching sweetness blooming in her lower belly. Chicken-legged huts notwithstanding, the Fade still offers a modicum of uncomfortable realism when it comes to physical symptoms. When did she develop this thing for the iconoclastic types, anyway?

Her eyes fall on the mortar and pestle. Not helpful.

When her wits return, Margo turns around. “All right. You mentioned in your letter that you feared Evie could be made Tranquil at the hands of allies. You suspected she was a mage after all? Despite not seeing it in her originally?”

Solas nods with a pensive expression. “I had not noticed it before, because my focus was absorbed by the mark and its unstable magic. It is plainly evident from the Dreaming side. The oversight is mine: I had not looked hard enough.”

“So how did this Cole manage to not only see it, but fix it?” Margo frowns. “Come to think of it, who is Cole, exactly?”

Solas leans forward and rests his chin on his folded fingers. “An excellent question, fenor.” He pauses, a twinkle of amusement lighting up his eyes. “Cole is... a spirit. As to the reason behind the success of his intervention, I can only imagine that it is because of the kind of spirit he is. Or, perhaps, the result of the fact that his actions were carried out in the Fade.”

Margo raises a finger and wags it for good measure. “Pause for a second. Cole is a spirit. Like you?”

She could swear she hears a soft chuckle, but it is hard to say for sure. Solas’s expression remains impassive otherwise. “Not like me. As I have mentioned, Cole is quite unique.”

Since it is abundantly clear that she will get absolutely nothing further from him on that particular subject, Margo changes strategies. “Fine. Interrupt me when I get this wrong.” She begins to fold down her fingers as she enumerates. “Evie goes to fetch the Templars. There, she has a run in with the entity you called an Envy demon — did you say it had overtaken the Templar commander?” Solas nods. “Wonderful. Bad juju, I take it. So. Evie gets an assist from Cole — who is a spirit. While they are both in the Fade, Cole notices the obstruction of Evie’s connection. He does not remove the obstruction itself, but creates some sort of bypass. So far so good?”

“As far as I have understood Cole’s explanation.”

“After that, Evie presumably wins Templar support — how did that happen, exactly?”

Solas shrugs. “My information on this subject is at best insufficient. To hear the others say it, she brought one of the templars’ prominent lieutenants back to life with a wave of her hand while dispatching Envy back into the Fade with the other. The soldiers who witnessed it whisper that the demon’s material form simply disintegrated in mid-movement.”

Margo rubs her face, trying to will away the utter consternation. “Right. So we have a rift-closing, demon-dispatching, dead-templar-resurrecting, totally untrained mage immune to magic suppression whom the people are hailing as the embodied emissary of a locally popular prophet. No wonder the Chantry clerics have their knickers in a wad.”

“Quite,” Solas notes dryly. “Although I am not privy to the internal debates between the advisors and the Chantry delegation. Much of this is gleaned from local rumors and idle soldier chatter, and thus is undoubtedly distorted. It would appear that some of the more zealous members of the Chantry have raised the possibility of another Rite of Tranquility, and their voices resonate loudly, without much effective opposition. I suspect that the mage loyalists — Madame de Fer and those who have joined as part of her entourage — see in the Herald the living confirmation of their fundamental fear of magic. They advocate for rigorous control, but without the ability to wield templar powers against the Herald, their arguments damn her further by virtue of a weak defense.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Margo grinds out. “Why is Tranquility even on the table? Shouldn’t it be a last resort approach?”

Solas shakes his head from side to side, whether in wonderment or worry, Margo cannot tell. “The Herald’s magic — all of her magic, including that of the mark — has destabilized to a dangerous

point. I suspect it is because it was always intertwined — that her survival of the explosion at the Conclave was intimately connected to the magic of the luck siphon. And that the mark itself was drawn and melded to the Herald because of her latent abilities.” He pauses, his face turning grim. “Unfortunately, she has very little conscious control over any of it at the moment. Master Adan and I are keeping her sedated until I can find a way to at least quiet the mark.”

Margo resumes her pacing. “If it is all melded together, then wouldn’t making Evie Tranquil deaden her ability to close the rifts as well?”

“It is a risk, yes.”

“So surely they won’t do it? Evie is the only one who can close the Breach!”

“Do not underestimate the foolishness of the ‘faithful’ when they are threatened in their hold on power, fenor.” She can read the banked anger well enough. “I mentioned this to the Spymaster, but I am not convinced that my argument was heard.”

“Could it even be done? If both Tranquility and magic suppression are induced by lyrium, is it not possible that Evie might be immune to both?”

“I do not know for certain, but it is certainly not an experiment I would recommend. If we cannot close the Breach permanently, the world is lost. The current seal is temporary, and it will not hold forever.”

Margo throws up her hands in helpless frustration. “And if someone is actually seriously arguing in favor of this idiocy, should they not be concerned about what might happen if they try to Tranquelize a mage who has previously undergone something similar? And who has a new connection to the Fade — one that is the result of an artificial bypass of sorts? Conversely, why are they not worried about how the luck siphon will react to an attempt to sever her again?”

Solas props his chin on his fist and his expression grows stormy once again. “Dorian reported on the events of Redcliffe, fenor. They know what future befalls the Herald in that scenario. The version of Alexius you and the Tevinter mage have encountered succeeded in rendering Evelyn tranquil, did he not? Besides...” His eyes, suddenly dark with an unreadable emotion, search her face. He shakes his head. “Besides, they do not see it, fenor.”

Margo frowns. “What do you mean ‘they do not see it’? They do not see the risks?”

“The advisors do not appear to believe any of it: not the luck siphon, not the botched severance from the Fade. Even the Seeker is questioning her own experience. Commander Rutherford and the Spymaster are of one mind on this, but I suppose it is easier to imagine a conspiracy where the four of us concealed the Herald’s magical abilities and strange immunity. The Chantry cleric, Roderick — you may not have had the displeasure — is calling for a public trial for the Herald and those involved, as well as for the Seeker’s official demotion and exile. So far, only the Ambassador has evinced a flexible approach, and raised objections.”

“Wait! What about the scar? Surely, that should be proof enough.”

Solas sighs quietly. “Fenor, it would appear that no one except for you, Cole, and myself can see the scar. And the Herald is unable to testify on her own behalf. Even when she wakes, her thinking and speech are disordered and thus not listened to.” His eyes go briefly out of focus. “Forgive me. I suspect I will be summoned shortly.” Solas stands up. “Whatever happens, I want to thank you for this reprieve.”

Margo covers the distance between them and grabs hold of his hand, as if that would prevent him from being wrenched from the dream.

“Solas, how do we solve this? There has to be a way.”

He shakes his head. “I do not know that there is, but in either event, please keep away from Haven.” He hesitates. And then, as if driven by an impulse that circumvents carefully built defenses, he gathers her into his arms and plants a soft kiss on her forehead. And in the next instant, he is gone, and Margo is grasping empty air.

She swears colorfully, closes her eyes, and wakes herself up. Above her, the stars are legion. Slowly, her wakeful mind reacquires some of the critical abilities dulled by the Dreaming.

Margo frowns. Scars. Invisible scars, no less. And what an unexpected “coincidence” that she just recently became acquainted with a set of equally arcane markings inexplicably visible to her.

And, scars aside, the other problem: what kind of mage is Evie, exactly?

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by the theobroma cacao tree, which we can only hope exists across the multiverse.

Next up: Returns, politics, and further revelations.

NB: The next two chapters are separate in the original, but I thought they flow better as a single, continuous chapter. It means that it's quite long, but since it's the concluding chapter of Vol 1, I figured I'd wrap it up without artificially splitting things on a cliffhanger. There will be one more chapter after that in this installment, which is an epilogue/interlude/prologue before Vol 2.

Eternal Returns

Chapter Summary

In which Margo returns to Haven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Walk me through this shite again, Spindly.” Sera doodles with the tip of her arrow in the powdery red dirt.

Margo sighs quietly. Ever since she shared the basics of her new intel about the state of things in Haven, they’ve been dawdling, taking every opportunity to slow their progression through the Frostbacks. Sometimes, the pauses are pleasant. Taking an extra half an hour to warm their lunch rations as opposed to wolfing them down on the go is pleasant. Boiling tea from the more innocuous local flora that Margo now easily identifies and collects, almost on autopilot, is pleasant.

Picking a fight with every hostile-minded critter is less so, but it gives her the opportunity to test Molly in the field. De Chevin sticks to her like toilet paper to a shoe, watching her every move in battle with hawking attention, and — she’ll give him this — providing a kind of safety buffer against her steadily decreasing blunders. Working with Molly has made things infinitely easier, especially when Margo manages to ignore the bloodthirsty head-chatter. The fact that the dagger might be semi-sentient is something Margo is not at all ready to examine.

She watches Ser Lancelot the Hygienically Minded clean the blood and ichor off his armor in a nearby stream, vapor billowing away from him in the brisk mountain air. He is far enough down the small south-facing ravine they have chosen as their resting spot that he would not overhear a quiet conversation. Margo has been circumspect with how much she reveals about the mess that awaits them. And she has been completely tight-lipped about Evie’s exact status, or what she is beginning to suspect might be the nature of the young woman’s magic. What de Chevin knows, Ishmael can find out. So her truncated story sounded rather unconvincing, but Ser Lancelot the Surprisingly Perceptive just gave her a long, heavy look, then let out an almost imperceptible sigh accompanied by a small nod. And didn’t push the matter further or ask questions.

Margo looks at Sera — and at the two little vertical wrinkles that have set up camp between the archer’s eyebrows. They’re a new, unsettling development.

“All right. There’s more to it.” After she is done with the more expanded version of the story — the one that includes the inconvenient fact that Evie appears to be an untrained mage without much control over her abilities or state of mind — Sera stabs her arrow into the center of her abstract yet vaguely obscene sketch and lets out an exasperated growl.

“Shity shite. All right. Gotta ask. You know this because you talked to Elfy? In a dream? You’re sure it’s true, then?”

Margo nods once and does not elaborate.

“Uh-huh.” Sera’s tone takes on a teasing edge, the more familiar affect a relief as far as Margo is

concerned. A worried Sera makes her anxious. “I mean, you wanna let Old, Long, Bald, and Ugly poke around in... places — grand, have fun. No accounting for taste, yeah? But couldn’t you just do it regular-like? Letting him into your head too, well, that’s a bit too close, innit? Just sayin’.”

Margo redirects the impulse to embark on the path of flustered denial and settles for a noncommittal shrug instead. “Sera, why do you dislike Solas so much?”

Sera retrieves the arrow and begins to smooth out her doodle with the tip of her boot. “Other than he’s an arse, you mean? Guess... just the type he is.”

“What type is that?”

Sera mulls over her answer. “The type that’d sell you out for some stupid cause. Feed you a fancypants apology for your trouble while he guts you, too.”

Margo opens her mouth to protest. And then closes it. It’s not that she thinks that Sera’s right, *per se*. But... There is something there. The indefinable revolutionary edge, the iconoclasm. Hard to articulate what it is, exactly. She stares into the flames of their small campfire, thinking. It is strange to hear Sera indirectly confirm her own impression — and Margo would be a poor historian indeed if she didn’t pay attention to the implications. It is a general affliction of the revolutionary type, this blindness to collateral damage that Sera describes. Can’t have the charisma without the ruthlessness.

She changes the subject. “What do you want to do about Evie?” Margo uses the sleeve of her coat to grab the simmering travel pot off the fire and pours its contents into three tin mugs. She hands one to Sera. “We’re going to stumble back into a political meat grinder, by the looks of it.”

Sera shrugs. “Gotta pick your battles, yeah? Untrained mages — bad for morale, sure. Weird luck suck — really bad for morale. But I mean, magic — creepy shite by the by, right? See, that’s why I like arrows. But it’s Evie we’re talking about. She *glows*. That’s the main of it. None of the others glow, ‘s’far as I noticed. And she maybe cares a little — like *cares* cares, doesn’t just give you that oily, squinty arse-purse face that all the hoity-toity nobs like to do when they want you to think they give a flying shite about the little people.” Sera scrunches up her own face in illustration. It looks like someone trying to smile politely after swallowing snot.

Margo winces in understanding and huddles around her cup. Her eyes drift to the jagged dip of the mountain pass on the other side of the valley. One more range — a day-and-a-half journey if they really drag their feet — and they’ll be able to see Haven.

“I guess she’s safer in the dungeon than out in the town. Especially with all those Chantry folk and the templars running around,” Margo muses. The silver lining feels thin indeed.

“Pillocks, the bunch,” Sera summarizes. “See, this how it is, yeah? I didn’t join the ‘Quisition for the fancy title. Joined for the Herald. Rest can hold on to their arses and jump off a cliff for all I care. I’m not leaving her in there to get turned into one of those Tranquil. Ugh.”

“We’d do well to have some kind of contingency plan. And we shouldn’t drag de Chevin into it, either. It’s not his mess.” What Margo really wants to say is that if she traipses back into Haven, Torquemada will very likely kill her — and make the life of whoever is associated with her miserable. Whatever Margo might think of Ser Lancelot the Sometimes Irritatingly Pompous, she’s not about to drag him into the classic power vacuum of the interregnum that seems to be gripping the Inquisition.

“We could bust Evie out! And sneak her away!” Sera’s expression clears, and she bursts into one of

her contagious belly laughs. “Can you imagine the look on Leli’s face? Or Cullen and Josie for that matter”

Margo chuckles, but shakes her head. “Evie won’t make it on her own. She needs the Inquisition, and the Inquisition needs her. She’ll need the training, the resources, and someone to do the political maneuvering. And they need the Herald of Andraste. At least for now.”

“You think like a politician, Spindly. Or a bard. Too friggin’ serious for your own breeches, you lot.” Sera looks up, and Margo is relieved to see her slightly wicked grin. “All right. Way I see it, we just need to get Evie back to normal, yeah? Then everything can go back to how it was, Evie can close the Breach, everyone calms down. Sitting in a dungeon — that won’t make you feel normal, will it? So, first things. Let’s send Knighty on his way — if we can unglue him from your heels.” She casts a quick glance down towards the water, where Ser Lancelot the Thorough is still trying to restore his armor to shining status. “Proper hates himself, that one, don’t want that at your back in front of things.” She scratches her head in puzzlement. “Wonder if it’s just the elfy bits. Or maybe ‘cuz the bits are elfy? Eww, not thinking it. Anyway, need to make sure we have a cache waiting for us outside of Haven, if we scarper. Then we go in, get Evie out, and get everything back to how it was.”

Margo cocks an eyebrow. “I think your plan is maybe skipping a couple of steps.”

“That’s because plans never work out how they’re supposed to,” Sera shrugs. “What’s the point of all that planning if it’s all gonna go tits-up anyway? Not that I mind tits up. Just not for plans. Do plans have tits? They really should.”

“That is a question best discussed with Warden Blackwall,” Margo responds, a little distractedly. From where they sit, the Breach is plainly visible. It feels... restless, somehow, its swirling depths pulling her gaze. She forces herself to look away.

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They set up their evening camp in a small cave near the mountain pass, after dispatching a few prowling necroslugs — or shades, as they are rather blandly labeled in the local parlance. By this point in their journey, they’ve fallen into a comfortable fighting rhythm. The sensation is unfamiliar, but not unpleasant. Ser Lancelot the Efficiently Murderous serves as their vanguard, Sera works from a distance, and Margo occupies the ecological niche of picking off the weakest links. By the second day, Sera managed to drag de Chevin into a competition over how many enemies each has killed, and she goads him until he bristles indignantly over the archer’s rather liberal arithmetic. Margo tries to stay out of it but is called upon on occasion to be an impartial arbiter.

After they finish their simple dinner of goat meat charred over embers, Sera climbs into her bedroll, and it is not long before Margo can hear quiet snoring. De Chevin drew second shift for the second night in a row, so she expects him to go off to sleep as well — or rather, to stare at the cave ceiling in avoidance of the things that stalk him when he closes his eyes — but he lingers by the fire, sword and whetstone in hand. He seems to be approaching the task of sharpening his blade with none of his usual meticulousness. Margo casts him a puzzled look over her own routine chore of pulverizing elfroot for a fresh batch of healing potions.

Ser Lancelot the Burdened by Heavy Thoughts sighs and lifts his gaze from the long-suffering blade. “The offer remains, my lady. Come with me.” When Margo doesn’t respond, he chews on his lower lip in apparent indecision and, to give himself something to do, pokes the fire with a stick to vent the embers. The acrid smoke, equal measures craggy wood and dry goat dung, is sucked up a narrow chute in the ceiling — an unexpected convenience that makes Margo conclude that the

cave is at least partially man-made. She waits for the knight to complete his utterance. “You are prudent to be sparing with your explanations. But I have played The Game for long enough to understand the political riptides that are threatening to tear your organization apart. I... Ah. Worry that such currents are not merciful to those caught in them.”

Margo cocks her head, trying to untangle the complicated emotional response that Lancelot the Conflicted seems to have to her. Well. She might as well just cut to the chase and ask him directly. There might not be future occasions to do so, and maybe she will learn something relevant about Maile in the process. Something that might help her understand the other woman better.

“I have some questions, Ser Knight.”

“Please. Just... Michel.”

Margo nods, a bit reluctantly. “Michel.” She sighs. Well, no time like the present. “I told you that I have lost my memory. If you want me to consider going with you, I need to know more. What’s your relation to Imshael? And how do I fit into the story? If he uses me to torment you, then there must be a reason, and it would help me if I could understand what it is.”

He says nothing for a long time. When he finally begins to talk, his words are hesitant. And then, at length, the story tumbles out of him, initially with audible omissions that Margo could easily identify even without the historian’s habit of reading between the lines: the periodic light blush on his cheeks gives them away. As the narrative progresses, he gradually forgets to edit out the less flattering parts. Or perhaps decides not to.

She listens, fascinated. The tale of the knight’s fall from grace is eye-opening on a number of subjects: Orlais and its politics; the status of the elves, both Dalish and those confined to alienages; the rigid hierarchies of her new world. And, incidentally, on bards. She learns of Empress Celene and Briala; of Gaspard de Chalons and his ambitions to gain the throne; of the Dalish clans and of the bloody massacres of city elves at the hands of the chevaliers. The story of the strange elven mage called Felassan catches her ear, sinking like an irritating little splinter into the back of her mind. The scholar in her shifts in giddy restlessness at the thought of learning more about the ancient elves and their culture, and of the historical and archaeological record they left behind.

As de Chevin stumbles down his narrative path, his face takes on a grim cast, and, with a jolt of sudden understanding, Margo finally identifies the defining tonality of the knight’s affect. The central emotion that seems to power him is profound and utter self-loathing. Apparently, Sera has identified the emotion ahead of her.

“It wasn’t your fault, you know,” Margo says once silence falls over them. “Imshael tricked you.”

“That my releasing the demon was not intentional does not make me any less culpable.”

When he finally arrives to the portion of his story that intersects with Maile’s — delivered through clenched teeth and a painful blush — Margo feels neither surprise nor unease, just a kind of abstract, resigned understanding. By this point, de Chevin has reached the emotional nadir of his confession, the moment where the pretenses of making oneself look better are finally stripped away.

It is, in many ways, a familiar story — a man stumbling after his goal in blind self-recrimination, recklessly testing the limits of his exile and disgrace. He had, de Chevin explains, no business going to that part of Orlais, let alone into an alienage tavern. A woman caught his eye — or, rather, as Margo infers from his downcast, miserable expression, caught the edge of that irritable, angry lust that comes from a mixture of too much alcohol and too much self-hatred. The woman was in

her element — laughing and joking, singing vaguely lewd and politically inappropriate chanties with a few of the other patrons. But there was a desperate note to her that, Margo guesses, must have snagged on the disgraced knight's own chaotic mood like a fishhook. Margo is inclined to take de Chevin's characterization of Maile at face value: she remembers the abrasive scrape of her host's jagged edges against her own consciousness from the reconstructed memories.

De Chevin, shamefaced and brutally candid, summarizes tersely how he propositioned her. And how, when she refused him with a laugh, he shoved money at her, in an effort to salvage his wounded pride and recast her rejection as pecuniary bargaining.

The denouement of the story is not quite what Margo expects. That evening, the tavern was raided by chevaliers, who, it turned out, were de Chevin's former order. In an odd twist of fate he found himself on the wrong end of his erstwhile colleagues' swords, and he fought them alongside the elven rogue he had insulted earlier. The two of them rescued the patrons caught in the crossfire, and, before reinforcements came, the elven woman helped him escape.

"Did we... What happened next?" Margo asks, on the edge of her metaphorical seat by then, because once de Chevin stops bothering with feeling mortified, he turns out to be an engaging if wryly self-deprecating narrator.

"I was wounded. You could have simply abandoned me to my fate — but you did not. We spent the next day hiding out in a larder — a fishmonger acquaintance of yours agreed to conceal us. To this day I feel rather conflicted over the smell of pickled fish. To pass the time, you told me about pursuing bardic training. And I, still set on my appallingly rude trajectory, told you that you would not survive it." He stares at his hands. "For what it is worth, I meant it as a warning, not as an insult. But no, we never... Ahem. As I said, you had sent me to the Void on that particular subject. Which was quite a bit more gracious of you than what I deserved. And by the time the drink wore off..."

"You thought better than to proposition again," Margo finishes for him with a sly grin.

He chuckles. "My lady, I am without a doubt a bastard, though I strive not to be that kind." His expression turns contrite. "This is how I knew your story of memory loss was true. You baited me then, about... Well, never mind. An ironically prescient quip, in retrospect. I wanted to see whether you would recall it if I gave you the occasion for it."

"I can only guess," Margo chuckles. "But you've come this far. Now I'm dying of curiosity."

A smile touches his lips. "If you must know, you told me that — I paraphrase — the sky would sooner open and rain down demons than I would find myself between your legs." He clears his throat, blushes to the roots of his hair, and focuses his attention on his boots.

A surprised laugh escapes her and bounces off the walls of the small cave in a cascade of echoes. Sera stirs and grumbles something unprintable. Margo quickly slams her hand over her mouth in an ineffectual attempt to stifle the peals of giggles.

"Well, then," she finally manages, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes and still shaking from suppressed laughter. "Accomplished on both fronts, if not quite in the expected manner."

Lancelot the Crimson looks like he is about to contribute something, but he just shakes his head, pinches the bridge of his nose, and shuts his eyes.

"Get some rest if you can," Margo finally suggests in an effort to help him out of his predicament. "You've got the worst shift."

“Will you think on my proposal? Returning to the Inquisition at this time would be unwise.”

Margo shakes her head sadly. “I know. But I don’t have much of a choice. I suspect you’d do the same if you were in my shoes.”

“Why?” he frowns. “Is there... Is someone... ah... waiting for you?”

Margo winces. “It’s not that simple.” Because, of course, it isn’t. Solas’s injunctions to steer clear of Haven notwithstanding, she is fairly certain that the elf knows perfectly well that she can’t. Not after that little revelation with the scar and what that means. If she is one of the only people who might testify about Evie’s state... Well. There isn’t much of an alternative option. The only thing Margo would like to know is whether Solas showing off his own markings was a coincidence, a not-especially-subtle form of manipulation, or an intentional message of the doublespeak variety. Whichever way the chips fall, it changes nothing in the long run. She sighs, resigned. “If you thought there was something you could do to help — even if that something was really tiny — would you try? Despite the risks?”

The former knight stares at her for a long time, and says nothing. Eventually, he nods, seemingly to himself. “You have not changed, you know. Despite the memory loss. You are still the woman I remember. I am... glad of it.”

And, with that disturbing announcement delivered, Ser Asshat gives Margo a formal bow and retires to his bedroll. She whiles away the rest of her watch finishing the potions and wakes him from his fretful sleep once the stick they use to keep time burns down to cinders.

Her dream takes her back to the embankment, but once there Margo keeps to herself.

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“This is a good spot,” Sera declares. Below them the cupola of Haven’s chantry shines a soft pink in the oblique rays of the sun.

Margo hesitates, wondering what to take and what to leave behind. Molly, she decides, is coming with. In fact, the thought of abandoning the dagger fills her with an eerie, itchy sort of dread. And, besides, walking in unarmed would only raise suspicions. Upon reflection, she stashes some elfroot potions and two of her three alchemy formularies. She keeps Auntie’s Compendium as a talisman in her coat pocket and Genitivi’s magnum opus in her pack. After a brief moment of deliberation, she deposits her journal alongside their other belongings in the little crevice between the rocks, right behind the enormous sequoia look-alike that towers over the rest of the forest.

De Chevin left them that morning, after a long and frustrating argument. Sera had stalked off mid-sentence, abruptly out of patience, with a “gonna hunt” thrown over her shoulder. Margo gave her retreating back the evil eye. Eventually, after much circuitous debating, she succeeded in convincing Ser Lancelot the Uncooperative to return to his task of tracking down Mihris — the woman whom Imshael had possessed — but not before he extracted a promise from her to keep in contact through an acquaintance at the Crossroads. And then he gave Margo a long, unhappy look, grabbed her hand, slanted a rough, stubby kiss across her knuckles, turned on his heels, and stomped off, bristling like a particularly ill-tempered porcupine. Even the creaking of his leathers sounded disapproving.

“Are we ready for this?” Margo asks Sera bleakly.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” the archer quips with inappropriate cheerfulness.

“Leliana is probably going to arrest me on sight. Just so you know.” Margo huddles into her coat. “You know the thing about dungeons? They really don’t grow on you.”

Sera sniggers, but then her face turns serious. “Got your back, don’t fuss. We’ll find a way, yeah? I just gotta talk to Beardy. Others, too. See, the ‘Quisition — it’s like a layered cake, yeah? Anyway. Lets go fix this sorry mess.”

Oh, hell on a stick, Margo thinks. How, precisely, are they going to do that?

They set off down the path side by side.

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They are stopped at the gate by a familiar duo: Tweedledee and Tweedledum are clearly taking their duties as sentries with utmost seriousness, which is to say they are lounging on a set of crates and playing cards. At the sight of them, Margo groans under her breath, not least because she is almost glad to see them. Whatever else might be said about the two idiots, they have the merit of being known quantities.

“Oh, you!” One of the Tweedles — the marginally more intelligent one, who doesn’t go by Merek — turns the full force of him smarmy grin in Margo’s direction. “We got orders about *you*, don’t we?”

“We sure do!” Tweedledum confirms. He pulls himself up to attention — or to an approximation of attention considering his perpetual slouch and prominent beer gut. “Proceed with us, please. And... uh, yeah! Surrender your weapons.”

“I am not proceeding anywhere, and I am certainly not surrendering my weapons to either of you nugheads,” Margo declares.

Sera nods. “Not leaving weapons without someone signing for them. We’re doing this procedure-like. You can take us to Quartermaster Thren’s tent.”

Tweedledee looks like he is about to protest, but Tweedledum interrupts him with an impatient wave of his hand.

“Don’t matter. Quicker we’re done with this, quicker we get back. Think we’re gonna get a little extra for it? For capturing dangerous prisoners?”

“They can’t very well be prisoners, you tit, they’re not in prison. You mean fugitives.”

“Don’t they need to be ‘fugiting’ in order to be fugitives? Running away, that is?” Tweedledum frowns at the challenge presented by this taxonomic subtlety. “Way I see it, direction’s all wrong,” he adds philosophically.

“Oh, shut it, you gits,” Sera snaps. “Just... Where are we supposed to go anyway?”

Tweedledee scratches the back of his head, examines the result of this procedure wriggling on the tip of his nail, and flicks the small black speck into the snow. “You’re to go report to the spymaster first. Guess she’s gonna decide what to do with you.” He turns to Margo. “And you, it’s off to the dungeon.”

“What d’you think she did?” Tweedledum asks. “Probably stole something. You rabbit ears are all thieves. ‘S’well known.”

Sera groans. “Better thieves than gormless prats like you two. Are we going, or what?”

The Tweedles inflate like a tandem of angry turkeys.

“Enough!” Margo barks. At this point, she just wants to get through this as fast as she possibly can, so there is no point wasting energy on these two. “Let’s just go to the damn dungeon.”

And be done with it, she doesn’t add.

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The path to the dungeons offers only the cold comfort of predictable procedure. Even the Tweedles are being fastidious — and this, in and of itself, confirms Margo’s suspicion that the social world of the Inquisition is truly going to hell in a handbasket. Nothing spells sinking ship quite like overwrought and punctilious bureaucracy. The two goons march them over to the requisitions tent, where Thren, scowling under her turban, receives Margo’s belongings and notes their arrival in her ledger in an oddly bubbly script. After that, Tweedledum gestures Sera over to Torquemada’s tent, and Tweedledee takes it upon himself to herd Margo into the Chantry.

She looks around with a muddled sort of feeling — Haven feels both familiar and alien. The smells are the same: fresh snow, wood fires, frying onions, frankincense. Sulphur and hot metal wafting up from the forge. But the faces have changed. The courtyard is practically crawling with templars. At the sight of their telltale armor, Margo wrestles down a kind of Pavlovian response, her fingers suddenly itching for Molly, or a grenade — or a rock, for that matter — and her legs ready to carry her either to safety or into the fray. She scans their faces. Many are young; most look strained and exhausted; all sport identical expressions of wary uncertainty.

The population of Chantry clerics has increased as well. As Tweedle corrals her up the steps, strands of conversations reach her, and Margo strains her ears to catch as much as possible, in case the information might prove useful later.

“... completely irresponsible, considering that we don’t...”

“... the Commander. At least measures are being taken ...”

“... what else, but blood magic...”

The temple’s main hall is oddly deserted. The cavernous colonnade, previously used to receive guests and socialize, is empty of people, nothing but the echo of their footsteps chasing after them in the semidarkness.

“Where is everyone?” Margo asks, not really expecting an answer.

Tweedle shrugs. “No congregating inside the chantry outside of scheduled times. Security measures.”

They walk down the steps towards the basement, and Margo wrestles with an intense, disorienting feeling of déjà-vu. The first time she walked this path was after Solas had dredged up Maile’s memories in exchange for her own. For a second, she isn’t sure whether she ever left — whether the last month or so actually happened at all and wasn’t just a demented dream, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Her mind flashes to a short story by Ambrose Bierce, one of her brother’s favorites. The protagonist, a soldier, hallucinates his return home to his wife in the space of the few seconds left to him before the noose snaps his neck. Perhaps all of this — Thedas, the Inquisition, this temple — is nothing but the last fever dream of her dying mind, a liminal space in which her consciousness is lost while her body shuts down.

“We’re here. Lud? You...uh... this a good time, then?”

Margo quickly snaps to.

Oh no no no. If this Lud is, as she is guessing, the local jailkeeper, questions about whether this is a good time bode very poorly indeed. She has a flashback to Generic Goon. Her heartbeat picks up. Not that Generic Goon was the worst of her problems at the time, but he certainly did not contribute much to her enjoyment of the mad magister’s hospitality. This is what has been irking her about Haven. The place seems to have acquired shades of Redcliffe.

Her fears are somewhat assuaged when it turns out Lud is a she — middle-aged, rotund, with dimpled, rosy cheeks and a web of laugh wrinkles around her eyes, which in the light of the torches are an odd shade of muddy green. Half of her face is covered with blocky tattoos. And she is no more than four feet — so, Margo decides, Homo Dwarvicus.

“‘Course it’s a ‘good time,’ you blighted mushroom. If you’re thinking of asking me ‘bout the spiders, just come out and say it. ‘Is this a good time.’ Peh. And since you’re here — where, tell me, is the cleaning crew? Also, the meals are late again. How am I supposed to do my job with all you incompetent nughumpers stumbling about like sun-addled deepstalkers?” She pauses in her castigations, and looks Margo over. ‘Now, what’s it you have with you, then? Another one?’

To Margo’s utter shock, Tweedle looks apologetic. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll talk to Dreyfus ‘bout the meals. This is... uh... the spymaster’s last prisoner.”

Lud narrows her eyes. “Elven lass? Well, if it ain’t a sodding collection. Got all kinds now. Just missing one of ‘em horned fellows, and we’ll have a complete set. And where, by the Ancestors’ revered shorthairs am I supposed to put her, eh? Not with Tethras, that’s for sure. And I don’t think she’d like being stuck with the odd chap, not that he’s ever where you left him.”

“Prickly? Is that you?”

Margo practically squeals with delight at the sound of Varric’s voice. The only thing that prevents her from taking off towards it is Tweedle’s gauntleted grip on her arm. “Not so fast.”

“Varric!” she calls out instead. “Are you all right?”

She spots movement in one of the cells. “I’m fine, I’m fine. As far as imprisonments go, this one is downright pleasant. I’ve had worse experiences at the Blooming Rose.”

Lud makes a disapproving noise. “No one wants to hear about that . Now. What’s your name, lass?”

“Margo,” Margo offers.

“Eh. Well, then. Let’s see what I got for you...”

“I don’t mind bunking with Evie,” Margo tries.

“Don’t be daft, girl. As if we’d keep the Lady Herald with the common folk. I suppose that thieving rapsallion with the frost-cough ain’t coming back, so you might as well take his cell. Step in here, please.”

Despite Lud’s jovial, matronly bluntness, the dwarven woman moves like a trained killer, so when she unlocks the door to a cell kitty-corner from Varric’s, Margo doesn’t argue. It’s not like there’s anywhere to run — she did march herself into this. She looks around. It’s everything one would

want from a dank dungeon. A thin pile of straw, an excremental bucket, and a couple of metal rings mounted into a wall, complete with chains and manacles. Whatever are they for? Margo's mind volunteers an entirely incongruous image of Lud parading around in a dominatrix outfit, complete with shining thigh-high boots and a riding crop. Margo shakes her head. That's it. She's losing it.

She gets a brisk patdown, during which Lud discovers Auntie's Compendium, leafs through it for concealed weapons — or, perhaps, a lockpick — and returns it to Margo.

“Not a mage, so it's not like you're going to do blood magic from a paper cut, and I don't object to reading materials. Keep it.” And then she offers a brief but oddly cordial nod and walks out of the cell. The lock snaps shut.

“Hey!” Varric's exclamation is full of righteous indignation. “She can keep reading materials, but I can't have writing materials? You know, my editor's not known for her patience, and sitting in here is putting me behind on my deadlines.”

Lud shrugs. “Think of it as me doing the world a favor. Now, much as I enjoy your sparkling wit, Tethras, I have a job to do. Unlike you sorry lot.” And with this, their odd warden proceeds towards the exit and disappears up the stairs, Tweedle in tow.

Margo takes a few steps forward to where she can see into Varric's cell. The dwarf is casually leaning against the metal bars of his cage, his hands in his pockets.

“I hear Redcliffe was a shithole, Prickly. Glad you made it. You all right?”

“It was a shithole, and I'm fine, give or take. Varric, explain to me what's happening here. Lud is... not quite what I was expecting.”

Varric chuckles. “Enough to restore your faith in the Maker, isn't she? That's because, believe it or not, Lud answers to Ruffles, of all people.”

“She's loyal to the ambassador?”

“Yep. I bet there's a story worth retelling there, but I haven't heard it yet. Maybe I'll just make one up.”

“Varric, I am at a loss. What is happening? Who is in charge? And what happened to Evie?”

“Right to the point, eh, Prickly? Much as I hate to step on your right to skip ahead, I suggest you start at the beginning if you want any of this to make sense.”

Margo nods in acquiescence. Varric takes a step back from the bars to give himself more room to gesticulate, and settles into what Margo identifies as his storytelling voice. “I'll spare you the journey to Therinfal — it doesn't make for much of a story. The interesting bit started when it turned out that the templar commander had been replaced by an envy demon. Not sure how, exactly, but there you have it. We fought our way through the keep, slipping on rotten fruit and bumping our heads on strangely low beams the whole way — you and I both know why. I'm sure it all looked hilarious from the outside, if you like that sort of humor. My brother Bartrand would have loved it. But that wasn't the end of it. The demon, ambitious thing that it was, decided to take over the Inquisition next. Don't ask me how that harebrained idea popped into its head. To hear the Chantry say it, demons are supposed to be clever — this one must have been the exception that proves the rule.”

Margo grins. “Taking over the Inquisition? Wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.”

“Exactly my point. Anyway, it tried to get into the Herald’s mind but must have not found it to its liking. Maybe it thought it was too crowded, since it wasn’t the only one rattling around in there. There was another spirit, or person, or whatever else you want to call him — goes by Cole, nice kid — who decided to give Her Heraldship a hand. My advice? If ever Cole asks you if he can help you with something, run the other way and don’t look back. Long story short, Envy stopped impersonating the commander, killed some templars, threw up some magical barriers, and, next thing you know, we were all charging after it, templars in tow, with exactly zero expectation of surviving.”

“Because of Evie’s luck siphon?”

“Heh, at that point even without the Herald’s luck it was all going to the Void. That should be a curse, you know: ‘May you be as lucky as the Herald of Andraste.’ I’ll give you the latest version of the story. We were getting overwhelmed, the demon was about to prevail, we were swimming in wounded and dying templars, Hero was out of commission with a blow to the head... The Seeker was barely holding her own, and I was out of bolts, just grenades left, and too much of a risk of friendly fire. This templar fellow, Ser Barris, charged after the demon, got a claw to the chest for his trouble, and collapsed practically on top of the Herald. The Iron Lady was occupied with holding up barriers, so by the time she made it over there, the templar wasn’t breathing. And then Her Heraldness, still holding on to that dead templar, sort of waved at the demon, like she was about to bless it.” Varric shakes his head. “Next thing you know, Envy — not much of a looker, that one, I can see why it thought the Lord Commander was an improvement — just... fell apart.”

“Fell apart?” Margo repeats with a frown. “As in, crumbled?”

“No, Prickly. Crumbling would have been fine. I’m all for crumbling . That implies it’s dry to begin with. No, no this was ...” Varric scowls in distaste. “Ever come upon one of those things you wish you could unsee? It sort of... scattered. Into uneven little bits. Wet little bits. That was the worst part. And after that, it scattered more, and so on, until nothing was left, just a sticky spot on the ground. I guess it solved the problem, but ugh. It’s just wrong .”

Margo winces at the queasy feeling in her stomach. “What about the templar? This Ser Barris?”

“Ah, see, that’s where the story gets really interesting. You like mysteries, Prickly? The second Envy... liquified? Vaporized? Anyway, the second it was gone, the Herald did another one of her little benedictions, and next thing you knew Ser Barris was back from the dead, fresh as a daisy.”

Margo frowns, trying to construct a workable model for this bizarre narrative. Solas mentioned stories detailing this occurrence, but she had thought it an exaggeration. Is it more than a coincidence? Perhaps, if both spirits and souls are substantial in some way, then a conservation law must be in play. Does thermodynamics apply? Her mind grasps for the fragments of an old conversation — overheard by the warmth of a campfire what feels like centuries ago. Dorian had tried to theorize about Margo’s own unlikely presence in their world. What had he called it? “A three-way swap.”

She needs to keep focused. Cosmological models aside, the politics is what matters at the moment.

“Is that why everyone concluded Evie is a mage?”

“No, Prickly, the reason everyone concluded the Herald is a mage was because of the kid. Cole. I’m sure you’ll meet him soon. Until he showed up and started talking, the templars were still inclined to think that the Herald was Andraste reborn.”

“I thought it was Cassandra who revealed Evie’s status?” Margo frowns in puzzlement. Was that

not what Solas had said? On the other hand, Solas had himself admitted that his information might have been faulty.

Varric shakes his head. “The Seeker did come out with it when we got back, but she didn’t have much of a choice by that point. The gossip’s been following us ever since Therinfal. Cassandra is... moral to a fault, but, sadly, no diplomat. Otherwise, I’d be telling you this story over ale.”

“What did Cole say, exactly, that incriminated Evie?”

Varric sighs. “Cole’s a bit... different, to put it mildly. Most of what he said didn’t make much sense, but it hit the right soil, as it were. Oh, something about stopping the magic from flowing, something about ‘those whose care is harmful and whose harm is careful.’ Nice chiasmatic opposition, that one — I might even reuse it. The bad part of it was about the Conclave. You know, if I live long enough to write all of this down, I won’t even have to embellish. ‘Pain, fire. A mountain of corpses. Ash and blood. She didn’t know their deaths were necessary. Her magic broken then repaired, she bears the power to mend the world.’ Trouble was, he delivered all of this right outside of Therinfal, in front of all the templars, a bunch of terrified nobles, and not a few equally terrified Chantry clerics. After appearing out of thin air. Of course, by the time we got back to Haven, word had spread. It didn’t help that the Herald didn’t exactly take these revelations in stride.”

Margo’s eyes widen with the sudden flash of clarity, part of the convoluted picture finally clicking into place. “Varric, wait. Was Cole suggesting that Evie’s luck siphon actually caused all that death? Skewed everyone’s odds so that Evie could survive?”

“Think about it, Prickly. Hundreds burned to ash, and, right at the center of the explosion, exactly one survivor. One. Hundreds of lives snuffed out in an instant, and she didn’t have so much as a scratch. Not to mention that glowing hand of hers that fixes rifts. What are the odds? Divine intervention or not, imagine how this must have felt to her. She’s got qualms about killing bugs. By the time we came back to Haven, she was completely unresponsive. And that mark...”

Before Margo gets the chance to ask about the mark, their attention is drawn by the rhythm of approaching footsteps. Two figures materialize at the bottom of the stairs, both of them wearing the telltale hoods of Torquemada’s scouts. Based on the long nose sticking from underneath one of them, she recognizes Asher, the snooty elven swordsman who accompanied their team in their fight against the templar camp. The other scout — a young human woman — Margo has not seen before. Behind them Lud is scowling like someone who has discovered cockroaches roaming her kitchen.

When he speaks, Asher’s voice is tinged with a hint of malice. “The spymaster wants to see you.”

Well, that didn’t take long. “And I was settling in so nicely,” Margo replies dryly.

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The conversation with Torquemada starts predictably enough. Margo is led to the same room she visited during her previous encounters with the spymaster. The redhead is there, waiting at the oversized desk, and save for the dark circles under her eyes and a new sallow gauntness to her cheeks, she remains her familiar corvid self.

Margo occupies what she is beginning to think of as her seat.

After that, the rigamarole begins, but it quickly takes such a bizarre turn that Margo finds her mind drifting, barely able to follow the string of absurd commentary and even more absurd questions

Torquemada levels at her. “I hear that Redcliffe was a harrowing experience. I am told you helped rescue a few mages... and a Tranquil? The Iron Bull speaks highly of your singing skills. Is Magister Alexius possessed by a demon too? Are you spying for Nevarra? It would be easier for you to simply tell the truth. Do you believe in the Maker? Did the elven apostate recruit you? How long have you been lovers? Have you read Varric’s books? Have you ever been to Ostwick? How long have you known about Evelyn Trevelyan? Have you ever heard the Chant of Light in its unabridged version? What are your ties to the Dalish? Have you ever been to Cumberland? How long have you known Seeker Pentaghost?”

After some time, Margo loses track, except for the overall impression that Torquemada is leading her down the zany path of unchecked paranoia into a thicket of erroneous assumptions so impenetrable that the chances of her finding her way out are slim to none. Still, she attempts to tackle the questions in a reasonable way, though she is increasingly tempted to simply answer everything with “blue.”

Finally, Torquemada pauses and glares at the two scouts standing guard by the door. “Leave us,” she orders.

Margo swallows. She has no idea what comes over her — a kind of bone-deep lassitude at this Kafkaesque mess, perhaps — but the words are out before she can bite them back. “You believed me to be a Qunari spy, then a Tevinter one. Is it still Nevarra’s turn, or will we be moving on to Rivain next?”

Torquemada pauses her aimless oscillations and perches on the side of the desk. Margo notes that the spymaster’s shoulders droop down in a weary slouch. When she finally speaks, her words are oddly quiet. “I am not addled, agent.” She fixes Margo with her pale eyes. “I do not believe you to be working for Nevarra.”

Margo frowns. “Then why...”

Torquemada lifts a finger in warning. Margo prudently falls silent. The spymaster gives a whole new meaning to the phrase “captive audience.”

“Cassandra would never betray the memory of the Divine, and hence she would never act against the Inquisition. Not even out of misguided patriotism. I will admit that your place in all of this baffles me, but in the grand scheme of things it is unimportant. I take Cassandra’s word for what it is: you reported your suspicions to her and followed her order not to speak of it to others outside of those who noticed the same patterns. Your disrespect for the chain of command is punishable, of course, but it matters little. You matter little beyond your immediate utility. We have much bigger problems.”

Margo waits patiently for the rest of the soliloquy.

“Do you know why Solas and Master Adan have kept the Herald sedated?” the spymaster asks, the melodic affectations of the trained bard nothing but a faint remainder in her voice. This weary, melancholy woman is not the Torquemada Margo was expecting. “Definitely not the right droids,” she mumbles and tries to see if blinking a few times might help dislodge the overwhelming feeling of absurdity. It doesn’t.

“What was that, agent?”

“I heard the mark was no longer stable. And that Evie was... incoherent.”

“How very well-informed of you, but I suppose you are sharing your accommodations with Varric,

so that is not a surprise. At first, those were the reasons. We thought then that things could not get much worse. Quite naive of us, in retrospect. No, agent, the primary reason Lady Trevelyan remains sedated is that when she wakes she demands punishment. The Herald of Andraste believes herself the cause of the deaths at the Conclave.”

Torquemada sighs and rubs her temples in little circles, the gesture oddly banal. “I cannot claim to understand what has been done to Evelyn Trevelyan. Solas believes that someone attempted to make her Tranquil when she was a child. There is no brand, so I find that rather unlikely, despite what the apostate claims about a supposed scar. But... I have seen things. Terrible, awful things done in the name of righteousness. Or love. Or faith. It might even surprise you to know that I have done some of these terrible things myself.”

Margo represses a skeptical harrumph. She can think of very few things that would be less surprising, but then again Torquemada’s tone is on the sardonic side.

“Attempts to conceal a child’s magic are stupid, but, like all stupidity, far from uncommon. Whatever this... Cole did, it didn’t simply restore her magic. It must have stripped the protection of forgetting from the traumas of her past. Becoming aware of them, all at once...Well. But, of course, the simple facts remain. If she is indeed a mage, she is untrained, un-Harrowed, and unstable. And, as it appears, immune to templar powers.”

“Spymaster, I think Evie is more resilient than you give her credit for. Give her time.”

Torquemada’s tone turns steely. “There is no time, agent. Evelyn Trevelyan is not a well woman. I was under the impression that you of all people may care that she does not suffer needlessly. The Chantry clerics, incapable of any sort of agreement otherwise, are all convinced that she caused the death of almost five hundred souls, not counting the Divine. Worse, she is convinced she is at fault. And I am inclined to think that this might be true. You were the one to notice this purported luck distortion, yes?” Torquemada’s nostrils flare with a frustrated exhale. “It matters little what I believe. What we believe. If the information Cassandra shared had not been leaked, then maybe...” She laughs mirthlessly. “We appear to have a problem with intelligencers, you see. The rumors spread like wildfire. Josephine is flooded with letters from our already scant supporters in both Orlais and Ferelden, demanding to know whether it is true that the Herald of Andraste is an untrained apostate — or possibly Tranquil, or, better yet, an abomination. Or whether she caused the explosion. Or — this one is especially inspired — whether she is a demon that feeds on death.”

Margo exhales a breath she didn’t know she was holding. This is a public relations disaster of truly epic proportions. Not quite what she had expected, certainly, but Margo isn’t sure whether the reality is better or worse than what she imagined. More complex, certainly, but also ironically predictable. How perversely logical that, in a world that runs on it, magic would inspire such fear and loathing. “The Inquisition has a public opinion problem,” she offers diplomatically. The understatement of the century.

Torquemada smiles with absolutely no humor. “The people would more readily accept an elf, or a dwarf — a Qunari, even — for their Herald. But an untrained mage of noble birth, concealed from the Circles? One with no control over her magic? One whose inexplicable and seemingly undeserved survival possibly cost us the Divine, hundreds of lives, and a chance at reconciliation?” She shakes her head.

Oh, Evie. The kid didn’t ask for any of this.

“We have been hosting several emissaries from noble houses that dutifully relinquished their children to the Circles. They demand an investigation — and threaten to withdraw their financial and political support otherwise. You have noticed that we do not grow our own crops or produce

our own food, yes? As things are currently, it wouldn't take much more than the opposition of two or three prominent families to establish a chokehold on trade and simply starve us out. What is more, the competing factions within what remains of the Chantry have united unanimously against what they perceive as a heretical organization and a Herald that is an affront to Chantry teachings. You saw the Chantry delegation visiting Haven, I am sure. There are those among them who are calling for the Rite of Tranquility as the only solution."

"Would you really consider this? And risk interfering with Evie's ability to close the rifts?" Margo tries, and fails, to keep the angry tremble out of her voice.

"Amusing that Solas appears to share your exact concern. It is not a decision I consider lightly, and it gives me no pleasure to entertain it. I simply fear that it might be a mercy, in the end."

"And an expedient way to placate the Inquisition's critics," Margo bites out.

Torquemada lowers herself into the chair opposite Margo and steeples her fingers, the gesture more one of nervous exhaustion than machiavellian scheming. "In truth, I am not certain that this can be salvaged. Perhaps this is the Maker's will. Only He, in His unfathomable mercy, would rain such subtle horrors on his wayward children, don't you think?" Torquemada closes her eyes briefly. "There will be no avoiding a trial. And it will most certainly be a public spectacle — we have absolutely no choice in the matter. At most, Josephine, Cullen, and I can attempt to choreograph it. But we are struggling against unfavorable odds. To put it mildly."

There must be a reason why Torquemada is oversharing. Margo seizes on the opening. "Could the trial be used to project a... different impression? To change people's hearts about the Herald? Create an illusion of strength?" She frowns. Wait a damn second. What does Torquemada mean by "choreographing?" Is this, in fact, an elaborate con? "Spymaster, do you mean to say that you are pretending to be siding with the Chantry clerics?"

Torquemada inclines her head in her habitual avian gesture of speculative interest, though the lethal edge is somewhat dulled by visible exhaustion. "A public trial needs antagonists, agent. It needs victims and scapegoats. Heroes and villains. One is only as good as one's enemies, and is it not much easier to overcome one's enemies if they are already secretly your allies?" She smiles pleasantly. "But my hands are tied as long as the Herald cannot — or will not — stand on her own."

The spymaster remains silent for a long time, lost in thought, her gaze unfocused. Margo waits. "Even if what the four of you have uncovered is true — any of it — you understand that it can never be known, yes? All rumors to this effect must be discredited. It would be easier to retain support if the Herald were a ruthless, cunning monster. But weakness? When it comes to magic, agent, weakness is the one vice that will never be forgiven. We must provide... an alternative explanation."

The former bard turned spymaster stands and pivots to the door. "This is bigger than any of us. The Inquisition must survive long enough to close the Breach. We have the templars for now, but we are unlikely to retain them if something is not done, and quickly. Already they turn a sympathetic ear to the allegations against the Herald."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Margo frowns. "Considering that I am currently imprisoned on your orders..."

Torquemada glances at Margo over her shoulder. "Conveniently for you — and, as it so happens, for me — your time at Redcliffe puts you outside of the circle of suspicion. You could not have disseminated Cassandra's report simply because you were not here to do it. It is more than I can

say of others. And whatever else you are, I know you care about Lady Trevelyan. But most importantly, she seems to care for you. Perhaps you will be able to get through to her. I will arrange for you to have access. You have a day. Give me an alternative to Tranquility. If you can't, then I will do what is necessary."

"Spymaster, who else knows about this? Other than the commander and the ambassador?" Because it certainly looks to Margo like both Solas and Varric have been kept ignorant of these background machinations.

"We may not be in Orlais, but The Game is played the same everywhere. We all have our designated dances." Torquemada's smile is charmingly sweet, and all the more terrifying for it.

"Tread lightly, agent. And mind your step."

## Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by Leliana's maneuvering.

Next up: epilogue/prologue, and a different POV.

# Epilogue

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Far away from the tumult of Haven, a man — who, of course, is not a man at all — shuffles through the lush vegetation of an overgrown and anarchic garden. A gentle northern breeze ruffles the wisps of hair at his neck. On the hillside, pollen-laden bees buzz contentedly as they return to the warm writhing dark of their hives for the night. His gnarled fingers brush against the fungus-mottled leaves of an embrium — or perhaps an orchid — and the plant shudders and shrivels and disintegrates under his touch, making room for its healthier brethren, the loamy soil reabsorbing the remainder and funneling it for the sustenance of other slow, quiet life.

He is not the first errant weed in this world, nor the last, and the thought comforts him as much as it unsettles, but in this place that he has learned to call Home, his roots run deep, fed by a magic that has not yet dwindled — for all worlds squander themselves eventually, so that other elsewheres can seed and sprout.

Long ago, before bits of him coalesced into an old beekeeper at the edge of nowhere, he wore other names. Sometimes the name of a hero, at other times, the name of a villain, but such is the way of things. It cycles with the ebb and flow of worlds dying and coming into being and dying again. It is one of the only certainties of an existence such as his.

But this is not his story.

Once upon a time, there was a man — though it might have as easily been a woman, and on some branches of the Great Tree, it is a woman, but such things matter little to his tremulous, amorphous existence — who found himself on alien soils and under alien skies, and, as others who found themselves in such a predicament are want to do, he claimed the world's fate for himself, for is that not the purpose of all stories, to walk in the shoes of the one who succeeds against all odds, and at all costs, and marches his way into myth and into that curious species of deathlessness that the world affords the enfleshed? Some, though few, say that he was mad, or else deluded, or simply wicked to the core of him. Others raise his name on their banner as a great liberator, as the savior of an age, who stopped the greatest peril the world had faced.

It goes without saying that both sides are wrong, even when they have the right of it. It is a simple corollary of their mortality, Goran muses, that humans plant and cultivate tales of heroes and saviors. But for his own kind, who see only the play of light and shadow in the leaves, it is the seedlings that grow in the rubble left in a great hero's passage that need tending.

Those are the stories that his kind forgets the quickest.

## Chapter End Notes

And with this, RAGT Vol 1 is done.

There is a lot more story, of course, in Vol 2, which is an ongoing WIP and updates slowly, but it does update ;)



Thank you for your reading eyes, for your comments, and for following Margo, the crew, and myself through this meandering misadventure. If you are a new reader, thank you for traveling with me down the path of this story, so late in the fandom's current lifecycle. If you are a returning reader, then thank you for traveling with me again.

May your roots run deep :)

<3

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